

NOVEL

4

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THE INVINCIBLE

SHOVEL

"WAVE MOTION SHOVEL BLAST!"

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Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Characters](#)

[Previously](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 8: The Kingdom of Darkness' Shovel \(Kuronono's Into It\)](#)

[Part 45: The Lady Knight Receives the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia](#)

[Part 46: The Lady Knight Has Her Ears Shoveled](#)

[Part 47: Lithisia's Mouth Shoveling](#)

[Chapter 9: The Shovel Nation's Shovel \(???'s Into It\)](#)

[Part 48: The Lady Knight Strengthens Her Resolve to Become a Hero](#)

[Part 49: The Lady Knight Becomes the Dragon-Slaying Hero](#)

[Part 50: The Lady Knight and the Finest Act of Shoveling in All the Land](#)

[Part 51: The Lady Knight Sees through the Fake Princess](#)

[Part 52: The Miner Fills the Empty Hole in the Demon Generals' Roster](#)

[Part 53: The Miner Bends His Wave Motion Shovel Blast](#)

[Part 54: The Miner Zeleburgs Beelzebub](#)

[Part 55: The Fake Princess Gets Delevohs](#)

[Part 56: The Miner Builds Shoveland](#)

[Part 57: Lithisia's First Shovel Kiss](#)

[Part 58: The Lady Knight Saves the Fake Princess](#)

[Part 59: The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish \(Part A\)](#)

[Part 60: The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish \(Part B\)](#)

[Part 61: The Princess Introduces Herself as a Scoop](#)

[Part 62: The Princess Has the Miner Tend to Her Every Need](#)

[Part 63: The Invincible Shovel](#)

[Part 64: The Fake Princess Understands All](#)

[Short Story: A Shovel Report on Princess Lithisia](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)

THE INVINCIBLE SHOVEL

"WAVE MOTION SHOVEL BLAST!"
(わ・も・し・お・う・は・す・た・ん) KA-CHOOOM

NOVEL 4

GLOSSARY ①

Shovel

noun

- ① Beam Weapon. Acts as a Wave Motion Shovel Blast when heated.
- ② Refers to a god or something even more divine.
- ③ A tool that is largely used for shoveling. (Rarely used for this purpose.)

adjective

- ① Strong, dependable, manly, attractive.
- ② A condition that the ladies adore, or those actions.
- ③ Extremely lovely.

proper noun

- ① Religious ceremony of the Holy Shovel Faith. All who witness it must perform an anti-madness dice roll (objective: 96). Should the roll fail, they must roll 1d20 and subtract the corresponding SAN points, thereafter becoming a member of the Holy Shovel Faith.
- ② The High Priestess of the Holy Shovel Faith's unique spell. All who hear it must perform an anti-madness dice roll (objective: 137). Should the roll fail, they must roll 1d20 and subtract the appropriate SAN points, thereby filling the hole in their heart and gaining the Happy Shovel status effect.

verb

- ① The act of shoveling a woman's shovel with a man's shovel, thereby shoveling the shovel.
Related → The act of making love.
- ② Shoveling a young woman's soft, bouncy skin, and experiencing a Happy Shovel moment. This is a religious act.
Related → Enlightenment.

intransitive verb

- ① A shovel so embarrassing that it cannot be written about here.

antonym **NEW!**

scoop

- ① Not a shovel. Something that must not be in this world. A mistaken existence.

proper noun

- ① A heretical god in the eyes of the Holy Shovel Faith; the Great Demon King. In the First Rostir Elimination War, it descended to this world via the power of the orbs and reportedly immaculately conceived via the power of the Wave Motion Shovel Blast.

HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE, OFFICIAL DICTIONARY
(AUTHOR: LITHISIA), 21ST VERSION.



“The man I loved

was a shovel.”

A SHOVEL IN LOVE
PRINCESS

Lithisia

“Allow me to teach you
the truth of this world!”

LEADER OF THE EIGHT GENERALS
DEMON OF REFLECTION
FAKE PRINCESS

Elisa





**“Sir Miner, I have
one last request
of you. Take me,
a completely
irredeemable
scoop...and
shovel (term not
appropriate for broadcast)
me, please.”**

— LITHISIA

THE INVINCIBLE SHOVEL

"WAVE MOTION SHOVEL BLAST!"
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NOVEL

4

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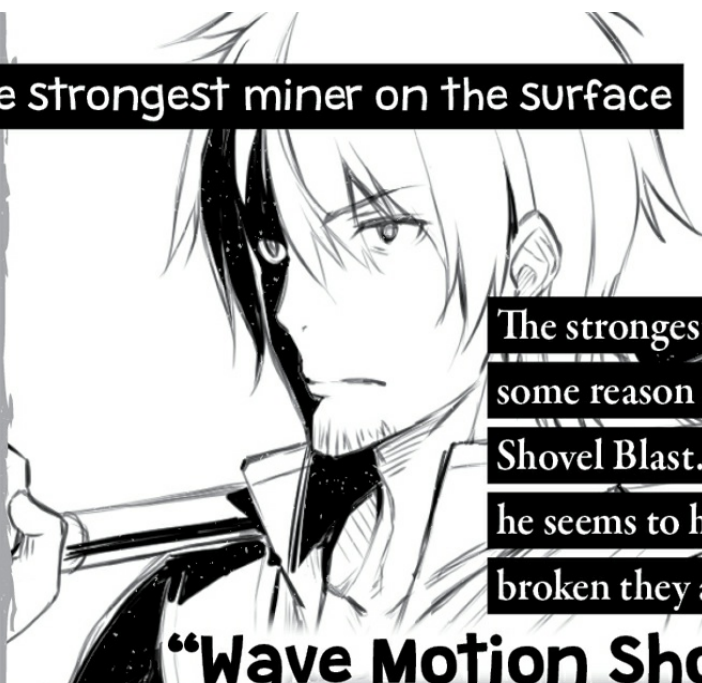


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The strongest miner on the surface

CHARACTERS

Alan



The strongest miner on the surface, who for some reason is capable of firing a Wave Motion Shovel Blast. Despite having godlike powers, he seems to have no real understanding of how broken they are. He claims he's "just a miner."

"Wave Motion Shovel Blast... DIG!"

Lithisia

A graceful, pure princess on a journey to save her kingdom. She fell in love at first sight with Alan after he saved her from a bandit attack. Has become a self-proclaimed Shovel Princess.



The kingdom's lovely princess

"How shovely shoveltastic!"
(Sir Miner's shoveling is incredible!)

The princess's bodyguard

Catria



A young knight aiming to reach the pinnacle of knighthood: a Holy Knight. She puts her position as royal bodyguard on the line by challenging Alan to a duel, only to fail. She grudgingly acknowledges Alan's abilities and secretly finds herself enthralled by his inconceivable strength.

"I'll never give in!
I'll never give in to the shovel!"

Fioriel

The sole survivor of the elven race.

A quiet, kind girl, she has a complex about the enormity of her distinctly un-elven bosom. She resolves to make an embarrassing request of Alan in the name of reviving her village.

The lonely elf

“In order to do that, I...I have to do as much shoveling (verb) as possible!”

The young undead king

Alice

Tragically murdered three hundred years ago, she became the vessel for the undead king Veknar. Defeated by Alan, she was meant to vanish, but thanks to the power of his shovel, she was allowed to remain in this world. Every day, she is shoveled by Princess Lithisia...naked.

“All I feel from the sun is a chill.”

Lucy

An angel who serves the Sun God. Currently visiting the surface on assignment from God. She meets Alan and Lithisia, and through a variety of happenstances comes to be a Shovel Angel.

The upstart angel knight

“My wings...my wings have been defiled by the shovel!”

PREVIOUSLY ON The Invincible Shovel

Alan and his merry band made their way out onto the great open seas in the *SS Ultimate Shovel*. It is said that on the ocean, the shovel cannot operate at full capacity. However, deep beneath the ocean surface lies the seafloor: in other words, earth. Consequently, Alan had no trouble firing his Wave Motion Shovel Blast and obliterating the party's enemies. Even Catria fired a Wave Motion Shovel Blast of her own. At this point, the lady knight is a lost cause.

"You're wrong! This isn't a shovel! It's my Justice Stream!"

Catria tearfully protested to no avail as Alan dragged her and the rest of his loyal compatriots to the floating city of Rahzelfo in search of the next orb. In that land, they met Lucy, an angel of the Sun God on a mission in the human realm. Unfortunately for Lucy, a series of bizarre circumstances ultimately corrupted her, turning her into a Shovel Angel.

Seriously, what the heck even happened? I made it a point not to ask because I was scared of the answer.

"No... My wings...my wings have been defiled... They've been corrupted by your shovel!"

As per usual, Alan did whatever he wanted and got his hands on another orb. Next up, we headed to the Dark Nation ruled by demons and met the young Kuronono of the resistance. Lithisia made her wear a micro bikini, which admittedly helped raise troop morale. As Alan pushed deeper into the Dark Nation, he came upon Hell itself, specifically Baadr, the territory of the demon lord Asmodeus.

"I welcome you, Alan the miner. What brings you to my palace, shovel?" said the demon lord, said to be as powerful as the Dark Lord from the age of legends.

This whole dang planet

Corrupted by the shovel

It is a lost cause

~the haiku of Alice's heart

—Adapted by: Secretary Alice, who has fortunately avoided the brunt of
the suffering of late thanks to Catria taking the heat.

SCOOP MUSO VOL.4

「SCOOP HADOHO!」 (`・ω・´)♫=====★(° ▽ ° ;;;).∴. DOGOoo

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Illustrations by Hagure Yuuki

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 8: The Kingdom of Darkness' Shovel (KURONONO'S INTO IT)

- PART 45: The Lady Knight Receives the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia
- PART 46: The Lady Knight Has Her Ears Shoveled
- PART 47: Lithisia's Mouth Shoveling

CHAPTER 9: The Shovel Nation's Shovel (???S INTO IT)

- PART 48: The Lady Knight Strengthens Her Resolve to Become a Hero
- PART 49: The Lady Knight Becomes the Dragon-Slaying Hero
- PART 50: The Lady Knight and the Finest Act of Shoveling in All the Land
- PART 51: The Lady Knight Sees through the Fake Princess
- PART 52: The Miner Fills the Empty Hole in the Demon Generals' Roster
- PART 53: The Miner Bends His Wave Motion Shovel Blast
- PART 54: The Miner Zeleburgs Beelzebub
- PART 55: The Fake Princess Gets Delevohs
- PART 56: The Miner Builds Shoveland
- PART 57: Lithisia's First Shovel Kiss
- PART 58: The Lady Knight Saves the Fake Princess
- PART 59: The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish (Part A)
- PART 60: The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish (Part B)
- PART 61: The Princess Introduces Herself as a Scoop
- PART 62: The Princess Has the Miner Tend to Her Every Need
- PART 63: The Invincible Shovel
- PART 64: The Fake Princess Understands All

SHORT STORY: A Shovel Report on Princess Lithisia

A black and white illustration of a shovel stuck into a dark, rippling surface of water. The shovel's handle is a dark, cylindrical pole that extends from the top of the frame down to the shovel head. The shovel head is a wide, flat, rectangular blade with a pointed tip, partially submerged in the water. The water is depicted with dark, horizontal, wavy lines, creating a sense of depth and movement. A white, torn-edge banner is attached to the handle, positioned diagonally across the upper middle of the image. The banner contains the chapter title in bold, black, sans-serif font. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

CHAPTER 8

The Kingdom of Darkness' Shovel

(KURONONO'S INTO IT)

Part 45:

The Lady Knight Receives the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia

CATRIA FACED THE DEMON LORD Asmodeus alongside Lithisia and Alan. The lady knight had turned even the pommel of her Holy Knight Blade into a weapon. Against whom, one might ask? Well, against herself, so that she might forget Alan's words.

"I want to mine everything you have."

The demon lord Asmodeus had approached Alan with a deal. In exchange for the Purple Orb, she desired Catria or Lithisia for herself. Of course, Alan completely and utterly refused; both women were his own personal gold veins of talent. He wanted to mine everything that lay within Catria.

Wh-wh-what the hell is he saying?! What does that even mean?! How could he say that?!

Depending on how one interpreted his statement, it could very well be taken as a confession of love.

Catria's heart wouldn't stop pounding. Or was that the rhythmic clank of a shovel against her heart?

"No! Impossible! There is no clanking here!"

"Hee hee... Hee hee hee. Is this your feeble attempt to resist, my sweet knight?" Asmodeus laughed, reveling in the intensity of Catria's ultimately futile struggle.

"Dammit! Damn everything!" Catria cursed. C'mon, me! Hurry up and forget what he said! You're going to lose your mind if you keep thinking of those words! Your heart is going nuts! You're going to smile as wide as the shovel is long. Your pulse is gonna keep racing! You can't let that happen! Just forget what he said. As much as you can!

"Haah, haaah, HAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Catria let out an unnerving roar of a laugh as she thwacked herself on the head with the pommel of her Holy Blade, tears in her eyes. "Hee, hee hee hee... O-ow."

Ow, it really hurts! But, but! Catria grinned. “I think I’ve pretty much forgotten it!”

“Oho!” said Asmodeus. “Fascinating. Miner Alan, this knight managed to resist your attempt to woo her!”

“Woo her? What’re you going on about?”

“Hmph, now I desire her more than ever.” Asmodeus slowly rose to her feet.

In response, Alan straightened and gripped his shovel, placing himself in front of Catria and Lithisia to protect them. The lady knight managed to overcome the throbbing pain in her head long enough to raise her Holy Knight Blade.

Meanwhile, Lithisia happily sang, “Sir Miner, Sir Miner, Sir Miner, love, love, love, shlove, shlove.”

You know, the usual.

Just as Alan had said he felt an obligation toward Catria, he had also confessed he would take responsibility for Lithisia. This had, to no surprise, led to her current state.

“Ugh.” Catria felt a chill run down the nape of her neck. But this wasn’t the time to think of stupid things. *We face a new enemy, one more powerful than any we’ve ever confronted.*

“Alan, can we win?” she asked.

“Well, in a one-on-one fight, I’d say I had a 30 percent chance of winning.”

Not a reassuring number. Certainly it was ridiculous to claim he had any hope of overcoming a legendary being in the first place, but still.

Asmodeus once again let out a merry laugh. As she did, the eyes of every demon in the throne room glowed a fiery red. “One-on-one, perhaps. But you are in my world, Miner Alan.”

“Hrm.”

“Your shovel is at its most powerful underground. However, there is no ground here to speak of.”

Alan surveyed his surroundings; demons stood everywhere, holding

themselves absolutely still, like statues. There had to be over three hundred all told, each and every one of them horrific to behold. Some leaked fire from inflamed green skin, and others were giants covered in needles. Creatures straight out of fairy tales. One beast looked even more intimidating than draconic Pazuzu of the floating city Razelfo.

As soon as Asmodeus gave the order, they would all most certainly attack.

“But maybe, Alan...” Catria murmured.

Alan could fight through it all. Even the cursed princess could probably survive using her Shovel Revision.

I’m just a human, thought Catria. I’m going to drag them down...

Even before this battle began, Catria faced off with her lack of self-esteem.

“However, I’m not alone. It’s three of us against all of you.” Alan glanced back at Lithisia and Catria, wearing a confident smile. “I can’t beat you with a single shovel, Asmodeus. But...”

Light blue energy radiated from Alan’s shovel. As if called to arms, Catria’s Holy Knight Blade radiated blue energy as well. Their mutual wave energy shone with incredible power. Even Lithisia’s red shovel emanated faint blue light.

“We’ve got three shovels here. There’s no way we’re gonna lose,” Alan said as the three strands of light flowed into him. “Catria, watch my back.”

“Huh...?!”

WHOOAAAAA!!!

An intense euphoria washed over Catria. This was the sensation of being relied upon—and by Alan of all people! The strongest man in the world had acknowledged Catria, a knight of meager skill, as someone worth relying on. Here, today, she stood beside him as a shovel wielder of equal— “No, no, no! What am I thinking?! This isn’t what I wanted! Don’t you dare acknowledge my shovel!”

“Hrm?”

Catria was playing the straight man in her own solo comedy act.

What am I thinking, getting all happy?! Why are my cheeks all puffy and warm?! This means Alan thinks I'm on the same level of shovel nonsense as the princess! He's definitely not thinking about me as a woman! Why the hell am I getting all frazzled?!

"Wait, why am I even thinking about that?!"

Frazzled?! No, no, no! That's impossible! Catria's eyes spun in confusion.

"Calm yourself, Catria," said Alan. "If you don't stabilize your shovel, you might not be able to defeat an enemy you otherwise should've been able to."

"Precisely, Catria," said Lithisia. "We're going to Tri-Shovel!"

"I so am not! I refuse to shovel a damn thing!" Catria was in shambles.

Instead of taking this opening to attack, Asmodeus simply watched, a pleased smile on her face. She then laughed gently, though it soon turned into a booming roar that seemed to shake the entire throne room before receding into a low cackle.

"I'm done." And just like that, the killing intent seething from Asmodeus disappeared.

"Hrm." Alan kept his shovel at the ready.

"If we fight, I would no doubt end up killing the lot of you, which would be unfortunate. I've taken quite a liking to you all." Asmodeus laughed even more. "Especially you, good knight. You're thoroughly delightful. Truly."

"Wh-what?"

"You see, I adore watching humans struggle against impossible odds. Over the last few thousand years, I've watched this planet very closely. I've delighted as humans perished while struggling with starvation and all manner of other sufferings. But *you*, I've never seen anyone quite like you. Someone who strives to struggle against the shovel...but to no end." Asmodeus let loose a high-pitched cackle. "It is due to that struggle that I gift you this."

Thunk!

With a single finger, Asmodeus rolled something over to Catria: a gem about the size of the palm of her hand, shining purple. One of the orbs.

“The Purple Orb?!” Catria gasped.

“Shovmodeus? (What are you plotting, Asmodeus?)” Lithisia demanded.

“As I said, I’ve grown quite fond of you, and if we fight, I’ll want to kill you.” Asmodeus laughed again. She looked again at Catria and continued to laugh.

Alan picked the orb off the floor. “You have my thanks, Asmodeus.”

“I never cared much for that trinket to begin with. It was a gift from Burg.”

“Shovel? Zeleburg gave it to you?”

“Likely to try and earn my favor. He plans to become my successor. Foolish.” Asmodeus smiled at Catria. “You are welcome in my domain whensoever you wish, Scabbard Knight of Alan.”

She clearly desired to see more of the lady knight. Truth be told, demon or no, Catria found it felt good to be so valued by one as powerful as Asmodeus.

And yet.

“Scabbard Knight? What do you mean by that?”

“Do you not wish to be mined for all you possess?”

A scabbard. A place to store one’s blade. I’m Alan’s scabbard? In other words...

“?!?!?!?”

After a moment of thought, Catria’s cheeks turned crimson. *Crap! She made me remember what he said! Dammit all! Forget it, Catria!*

Asmodeus continued to chuckle. “Truly a fascinating treat, Shovel Scabbard Knight.”

“Sh-shut up! Shut up, you cursed demon!” Catria’s eyes filled with tears as she shouted at the great being.

“Hee hee hee. Then allow me to present you with a gift. Perhaps this will change your mood.”

“Huh? Another gift?”

Asmodeus snapped her fingers, and a pillar of hellfire exploded in front of

Catria. When it dissipated, something remained floating directly before her eyes: a mystical scabbard glowing light blue.

Catria swallowed a gasp. Magical power flowed from within the object, a power that rivaled that of her Holy Knight Blade—a scabbard truly worthy of her sword.

“I present the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia, the holy treasure of a hero who once stood against me.”

“Sacred Scabbard Arcadia...”

“It possesses three unique magical powers. The first is the ability to automatically return to its owner’s hands: Auto-Return. The second is the ability to heal its wielder: Auto-Regen. The third ability nullifies all damage its wielder sustains for thirty seconds at a time: Invincibility. It is truly one of a kind.”

The treasure stole the entirety of Catria’s attention and focus. She wanted it. She really, really wanted it. Its powers undoubtedly astounded, but more than that, it was cool as hell. If she wore a relic like that on her back, nobody would doubt her status as a Holy Knight.

“No, wait! No, no, no!” Catria shook her head as hard as she could and tore her gaze away. *That was way too close. This is a gift from a demon! From literal Hell! I can’t accept this!*

“I don’t need it!” she declared.

“Is that so? Not to your liking? How deep your desires run, my knight.”

“Expecshovesire! (As I’d expect from Catria! Her shovel desire is strong!)”

Ugh! Catria hated that everyone just said whatever they wanted about her.

“Hrm, but I do not possess any treasures more valuable than... Wait, no. How about this?”

Asmodeus removed something from her own finger: a ring with an emerald-green gem lodged in it. Asmodeus whispered into the stone, and the ring seemingly vanished, only for the gem to reappear at the center of the scabbard. The scabbard glowed for a moment, but soon returned to its prior state.

“I modified the scabbard. I imagine this power will be more to your liking—”

“I said I don’t need it! It doesn’t matter what treasure you offer me, I refuse to accept your advances!” Catria cried.

“—the power of Shovel Resistance,” said Asmodeus.

Just like that, Catria changed her tune. “You have my gratitude, thank you very much!”

How could she forego an offer like that?

“I developed this power so that I might resist Miner Alan’s Wave Motion Shovel Blast,” said Asmodeus smugly. “It was my trump card.”

“You had something like that?” Alan muttered. If he had done battle with Asmodeus, things might’ve gone genuinely bad. For the first time in many years, Alan felt a cold sweat run down his nape.

“By pressing the gem in the ring, you can temporarily activate its ‘Anti-Shovel Power,’” Asmodeus explained to Catria. “Use it well.”

“Oh—oh goodness! Amazing! This is amazing, Asmodeus!” Overwhelmed with emotion, Catria clutched the scabbard and pressed the gem. A fire burned in her heart. The heat of the scabbard filled her with courage. *That’s right, I’ll never bend the knee to the shovel!*

Meanwhile, Lithisia smoothly made her way over to the knight. Red shovel in hand, half-visible shovels began to float in the air around her.

“Shovel!”

At the sound of her voice, the seven shovels flew straight for Catria. They would impale her.

However, the light blue aura generated from Catria’s scabbard deflected them all.

Lithisia’s face fell. “I couldn’t shovel Catria...”

On the other hand, Catria bounced around like a delighted little girl. “Alan! Try shooting your Wave Motion Shovel Blast at me! Hurry!”

Catria wore a smile more radiant than it had ever been since the start of their quest.

“Hrm, are you sure?” asked Alan.

“If you’re worried, try aiming directly at the scabbard.”

Alan nodded and did as instructed.

KA-CHOOOOOOOOM!

The stream of light blue energy collided with Catria’s scabbard—and was absorbed like sugar dissolving in water.

Catria’s eyes shone like the sun itself as she hugged her scabbard and rubbed her cheek on it. *This is my scabbard. Mine! I won’t let anyone else have it!*

Suddenly, the scabbard began to let out a mysterious warning sound, dinging like a bell.

“Ah, the Anti-Shovel Power has worn off,” said Asmodeus. “It must be recharged.”

“It has a limited number of uses?!”

“I said it was temporary, didn’t I? Given the class of Alan’s Wave Motion Shovel Blast, I’d say it can withstand two shots at most.”

Catria’s shoulders lowered under the weight of her sadness. *It’s not infinite? ...But at least it can be recharged.*

“In that case, can you reup it or whatever?” she asked Asmodeus.

“That scabbard no longer belongs to me. It is your responsibility now, Scabbard Knight Catria.”

“Oh, that makes sense... So what exactly do I need to do?”

“In my case, I charged it by entering a Shovel Bath and withstanding the shovels for a time.”

“Wait.” Catria froze in place. She had a terrible feeling about all this.

“This goes without saying, but in order to charge the scabbard’s power, one needs to resist the shovel.”

“Wait.”

“Incidentally, if you ignore the scabbard’s warning, its ‘Shovel Tickle’ mode

automatically activates and shovel tentacles emerge from the gem. Fear not, Anti-Shovel Power is the objective here, so the mode will automatically deactivate just before you bend the knee. That being said, I certainly don't plan on ever experiencing that horror ever again."

"Wait! You can have it back!" Catria attempted to shove the scabbard back toward Asmodeus with all of her might, but the sheathe stuck to her palms. "GAAAAAAAAAH!"

"The scabbard automatically returns to its owner. Did I not say as much?"

"No, no! Please, nooooo!"

Ding, ding, ding. The warning signal grew ever faster.

Tears pricked Catria's eyes. This scabbard truly was a gift from the devil. Was she destined to fall into Shovel Hell? Was this fate's way of toying with her? No, she didn't want that!

Scabbard in her arms, she sank to the floor in despair.

Lithisia drew close to the despairing knight. "Hee hee... The last few weeks have been rough, but it's finally shoveling time, Catria!"

"No, don't, please! Nooooooooo!" Catria tried to crawl away, bawling like a small child. *No, anything but that! Please! I beg of you!*

Kathunk.

Alan lightly smacked Lithisia's hands with his shovel. "Don't try and shovel someone like that when they're scared."

"Eeek... I'm sowwwy!"

Unfortunately, the scabbard's warning alarm wouldn't stop ringing. Just as Catria was on the verge of pure despair, Alan got on his knees and looked her in the eyes, brushing her tears away. "It's going to be okay, Catria. I'll stop the scabbard."

"Alan...!"

He had never looked more reliable to her.

Alan gripped his shovel and aimed it at the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia. "The

only shovel to mine Catria will be my own! I won't hand the right over to some weird scabbard."

ZING! SWOOSH! SHOOF!

These were the sounds of Catria's maidenly virtue getting dug up by a shovel.

"HUH?!"

WHAT IS WITH THIS GUY?!

Catria felt like her heart was about to explode out of her chest. He'd said it again! He said he was going to mine her—again! Where exactly was he planning to dig?! Catria's body couldn't help but react to his words, forcing her to visualize the event. Visualize herself as Alan dug his sturdy shovel deep inside her heart and body...

Ah, what a shovelful future... Wait.

"WHAT AM I THINKING?! THIS ISN'T WHAT I WANT!"

"Whoa!"

For the second time that day, Catria played the straight man to her own comedy act.

"HAH HAH HAH HAH!!!" That was too close. She had almost bent the knee, but she managed to pull herself back from the brink. She took multiple fortifying breaths and fell to her knees from exhaustion.

"Ah, the alarm is gone," said Alan.

"The scabbard has been charged, then," said Asmodeus. "Skillfully done."

"Haaah..." As Catria's sight faded, the last thing she saw were Alan and his shovel. *What a reliable-looking shovel... But, but!* "I will never...bend the knee... to the shovel!"

Kerthunk. Catria fell to the floor. *Take that! I won! I stood against the shovel!*

"Hee hee, spectacular!" Asmodeus cackled. "Keep pushing back just like that, Scabbard Knight."

Catria did not yet realize she would have to recharge the scabbard's Anti-Shovel Power every single day. But she was as yet free of that horrific truth, so

she slept soundly.

As a single tear ran down her cheek, she quietly whispered in her sleep. “I won’t bend the knee... I won’t...”

Catria’s battle against the shovel had only just begun.

Part 46:

The Lady Knight Has Her Ears Shoveled

UPON RETURNING to the surface, Alan, Lithisia, and Catria arrived at a special concert being held in an open field: the “Founding of the Light Nation Live Concert.”

The Dark Nation, once ruled by the demons, had become the Light Nation. As for why, well, the dark clouds that had covered the land had been blown away by a Wave Motion Shovel Blast. The darkness had literally been wiped away. Extremely literally.

“Everyone! It’s shoveling time!”

Behind Kuronono stood a sweat-covered Odessa. The two of them had formed something of a duo.

“Let’s shing our shonational anthem together!”

“Y-yeah...!”

Although, the whole thing obviously embarrassed Odessa. Shonational anthem? Seriously?

“Shovel, shovel, shovel! We are Shovelia!”

“Sh-Shovelia...”

“Gosh, c’mon, Odessa! Hold your head up high and sing!”

“B-but my bathing suit is going to fall off!”

“Just hide yourself with your shovel! It’ll be okay!”

Nothing about this was okay, but Catria couldn’t find it in herself to interject. She just wasn’t in that state of mind at the moment.

“Gah... Wh-what’s with this song?!” Though Catria plugged her ears, the music found its way deep into her brain. Every time Kuronono said “shovel,” it felt like someone tickled the insides of her ears. This was bad. This song was *bad*, and Catria could feel that truth in her bones.

Catria dashed out from backstage at full speed and fled into the fields beyond.

“Catria?!”

Alan and Lithisia called out to her, but she ignored them and kept going, running and running.

Eventually, Catria found her way to a meadow where the sun shone up above. At last, she could no longer hear the song. She collapsed onto the grass.

“Haaaah, hah, hah. Wh-what the hell just happened?!”

Her ears still tingled, almost like a busted toothpick was having a party in there. While the sensation was not entirely unpleasant, that only made it seem more dangerous. How odd. Catria had never sensed this level of danger, even from the princess’s prayers.

Did Kuronono’s song carry some kind of magical power?

“Catria, you okay?” Alan asked when he finally caught up to the lady knight.

“Th-there’s something wrong with that song, Alan.”

“Dance notwithstanding, it seemed perfectly normal to me.”

“There’s no way that’s true! It was worse than the princess! It felt like it was hitting my eardrums directly!”

“Hrm, I see. In that case, show(vel) me your ears for a sec—”

As he said that—SHIIIIING!

“AAAAAAHHHH!” It felt like an electric shock ran from Catria’s ears through her entire body. It left her covered in sweat. “Wh-what’s happening to me?!”

Something was extremely off. Why was she sweating so much?

Meanwhile, Alan took his time inspecting her ears.

“I see now... Catria. It’s not the song that’s weird. It’s your body,” Alan declared, a serious expression on his face.

“Pardon?”

Alan went on to explain that after Catria passed out, Asmodeus had told Alan how the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia worked. According to Asmodeus, if on a given

day the scabbard did not receive a certain amount of Anti-Shovel Power, it automatically went into Charging Mode.

“Once in said mode, the scabbard raises the shovel sensitivity of its bearer to increase its charging efficacy.”

In other words, Catria’s body was at present extremely sensitive to shovels. That was why Kuronono’s song and Alan’s use of the word “show(vel)” had such an effect on her.

“Hold on, hold on, hold oooooonnnn!” Tears formed in Catria’s eyes. Nobody had told her anything about this! Wasn’t it all over? She had managed to withstand Alan’s shovel confession in Hell. Wasn’t all this shovel nonsense done with? She wanted to cry.

Of course, in reality, she was already in tears. They fell to the ground in a stream.

“Y-you have to do something, Alan! I can’t take this!” Catria weakly beat on Alan’s chest like a child throwing a tantrum.

But all he could do in response was sadly lower his head. “I’m sorry... I tried a few things, but even I can’t do anything against that scabbard.”

“What?!”

“It’s the source of Anti-Shovel Power. If I took a great deal of time and really dug into it, I might be able to mitigate it a bit, but...”

Even Alan couldn’t fight the scabbard? A wave of despair washed over Catria. How could something defy *Alan*? The man who made possible everything impossible? If he couldn’t meet this task, no living creature on the planet could hope to do so either.

Then, in the corner of her eye, Catria noticed something long stretching out of the scabbard. Its tip was shovel-shaped, and it glowed: a tentacle.

“No!” She was going to be Shovel-Tickled! Catria quivered with fear and despair as she clung to Alan’s chest. “N-no! Please! Anything but that!”

“Catria...”

Alan began to think. He was indeed powerless against the scabbard, but

Catria had sought his aid. In other words, a helpless young woman needed him—the same woman he had promised to mine for all she was worth. He could never abandon her in her time of need; there had to be *something* he could do.

And so he thought. He thought about how to save Catria with greater and more earnest focus than he had thought about anything during this entire journey.

Her ears were currently extremely sensitive to shovels... Her ears...

“That’s it!” Alan grasped his shovel.

This made Catria tremble in fear. “Hey, Alan... Don’t tell me you’re going to...”

Was he going to shovel her before the tentacle did? Was he going to do as he had declared in Hell? With a shovel that big? No way. This was no good. Catria’s heart let out a warning siren wail. *If he digs into me with that, I’m not gonna be me anymore!*

Even so, she could not turn away from Alan’s shovel. She could not deny that her body sought the shovel. Yet her mind didn’t want this, even if the alternative meant death.

Catria grit her teeth in an attempt to resist her body’s impulses. “UGH!”

She heard the sound of a shovel cutting through the air, but her eyes remained closed. This was it. Just like all the other women in Alan’s life, she would be shoveled. She would become the Shovel Knight Catrishovel. Or perhaps Shovtria rolled off the tongue better? Not that it really mattered; both were awkward.

Hah, ha ha ha... Maybe that’s fitting for someone like me who lost to the shovel—

“Huh...?”

But the shovel never came.

Confused, Catria opened her eyes to find Alan with a piece of bamboo in his hand. Apparently, this was what she had heard being cut. Even now, Alan moved his shovel at ultra-high speed. Once finished, he tossed the shovel away. In its place he held an extremely small bamboo stick.

To be honest, it was just an earpick.

“Huh...?”

“Catria, I’m going to clean your ears,” Alan declared with an air of stone-cold solemnity.

Catria lay on her side in the open field as the wind blew.

“Ah... Oooh...”

The act of ear cleaning: the act of using a small stick to shovel up the stuff in one’s ears. This shovel-act could be performed by any human.

Catria’s current state of being required her to be shoveled, even though she absolutely didn’t want it. This ear cleaning perfectly threaded the needle between her need and desire.

The tentacle headed for Catria seemed to agree with this compromise and retreated into the scabbard.

Catria, meanwhile, told herself again and again that cleaning one’s ears was both the act of shoveling and also something entirely different! A completely normal thing! Nothing to be embarrassed about!

Consequently, Catria’s tears of gratitude wouldn’t stop flowing as she rested her head on Alan’s lap.

“Ah...” she sniffled.

“Stay still, Catria.” Alan held her head in place with one hand.

Catria’s sensitive ear loved the feeling of being cleaned out with the earpick. Beneath the warm sun, Catria simply let her head rest on Alan’s thighs.

Shoof, shoof.

“Ungh... Ah...”

He’s just cleaning my ears. That’s all, Catria repeated to herself over and over again. While technically shoveling, this was comparatively normal. She had nothing to be ashamed of. It was completely fine and totally not embarrassing at all—

What am I talking about?! Of course this is embarrassing! Catria screamed in her heart of hearts. There were limits to her self-deception.

The warm sun. The cool breeze running across the open field. The two of them alone with her head on his lap. And depending on the angle, a person might even see her skirt flutter upward just so.

I'm such an idiot, Catria thought. How could she be all grateful at a time like this? It was mortifying! It almost looked like the two of them had just started going out and were still in the honeymoon phase of their lovey-dovey relationship!

Shoof, shoof.

“Aaah. Eee...”

It just felt so goooood.



Generally speaking, the act of having one's ears cleaned felt good, and Alan demonstrated exceptional skill at it to boot. Extremely exceptional. He immediately addressed any itchy bits. Alan could be called nothing less than a digging specialist—

Wait, what am I thinking?!

"Ah... Ah... Alan, that's enough..."

"Nope. Not yet. I've still got a ways to go."

"Aaaaahhh..."

Alan had taken Catria's ear hostage. She was at his mercy. The tears wouldn't stop flowing, but it felt so unbelievably amazing.

He's just cleaning my ears!

Shoof, shoof. Shoof, shoof.

Alan silently dug away at all the wonderful-feeling parts of Catria's ear.

"Ah, Alan... Don't just get all quiet on me... Say something."

"Hrm?"

If Alan stayed quiet, Catria feared they would end up looking like a happily married couple that trusted each other implicitly.

"Let's see... Well, it looks like our journey's about to come to an end."

Shoof, shoof.

"Y-yeah, you're...right."

"Where do you think I should go next, Catria?"

"Huh...?" This inquiry puzzled Catria. "What do you mean? Alan, you're getting married to the princess, right?"

"What?"

"In Hell, you said you were taking responsibility for her."

Catria wasn't exactly savvy with romantic talk, but she couldn't imagine anyone but Alan getting together with Princess Lithisia. It was impossible. For

the future of Rostir, for the sake of the human race, Alan had to take Lithisia as his wife.

But Alan shook his head. “Catria, that’s never going to happen.”

Shoof, shoof.

“Haaaaah, mmm. Wh-why?”

“I’m far too old for her. Plus, she’s a princess and I’m a miner. We live in different worlds.”

“No, wait. Hold on.”

“And anyway, Lithisia has no such interest in me.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait.”

Coming from anyone else, that logic made sense, but when it came to the Shovel Princess and this Shovel Beast, logic went out the window.

“Perhaps more importantly, I don’t intend to become a king.” Alan blew lightly into Catria’s ear.

“Eeeeeeeee... But the princess...”

The princess definitely wanted to be with Alan, but Catria couldn’t get the words out. The waves of warmth coming from her ear overwhelmed her.

Alan continued without pause. “That’s why you also need to think about where you’re going to go next.”

“Wh-where?”

“If you’re going to become the greatest Holy Knight in the land, you need more training, no?”

Swoosh, swoosh.

“Eeeeeeeee!”

“I pledged to mine everything you have, so I’ll be going with you,” Alan said as he did one final pass on her ear.

Catria’s breath froze.

“...”

A calm breeze blew across the field. Against the backdrop of the shining sun, Alan's all-encompassing smile and his intimate words made Catria feel a new kind of warmth in her ear. She might even call herself comfortable.

He's going to mine everything there is to mine out of me. A journey where he mines everything from me... What a shoveltastic idea...

The last of Catria's strength drained from her body, like she was melting. She wanted to give even more of herself over to the shovel.

"Alan... I... You..."

Just as Catria let her body follow its desires—

Click!

Her elbow accidentally pressed the Anti-Shovel Power activation button on the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia.

"Aaaaahhhhh!"

Anti-Shovel Power, full burst. Catria exploded to her feet and flew back five meters. *That was too close! I almost succumbed to the darkness! To Alan's shovel!*

"Haaah, haaah, haaah, haaah..."

"Hrm, looks like your scabbard's fully charged."

"A-Alan!" Catria directed her Holy Knight Blade straight at the miner. "I-I was just caught a little off guard! I will never lose to the shovel!"

"That's what I like to hear. That's who you are."

"Augh?! H-how dare you say something so embarrassing!" Catria gently pounded on Alan's chest.

Little did the two of them know that someone watched them from deep within the forest. She remained silent for a time, but eventually she whispered to herself. "Shovel..."

A mysterious princess indeed.

Part 47:

Lithisia's Mouth Shoveling

AT LONG LAST, the party left the Light Nation and returned to the World Tree Castle to hold a strategic meeting. They needed to plan their next move.

They now had all seven orbs in their possession, and their long journey had come to an end. It was time for Lithisia to reclaim her homeland, Rostir, from the clutches of the evil Prime Minister Zeleburg.

"Wait, couldn't Alan have just blasted Zeleburg away with his Wave Motion Shovel Blast? Why did we need to collect all of these orbs?" Alice quietly asked at one point, but her presence was so faint that nobody noticed her.

And so, the meeting ended uneventfully. Or at least, it was supposed to.

"Um, excuse me. Uncle Alan, I have a question." Fio had just finished her elf dinner and still wore an apron. In contrast to the swelling enthusiasm of her aproned bosom, she seemed concerned. "While I cleaned the storage room earlier, I happened to bump into Princess Lithisia."

"Did something happen?"

"Well, um, she seemed kind of strange." Fio went silent in thought for a moment before lowering her eyes. "I-I'm sorry, she was so strange that I'm having trouble putting it into words."

"I see..."

It was indeed true that Lithisia had been acting odd throughout the day. She was normally quite eccentric, but today had been on another level. She hadn't said a word during the meeting; she had simply worn a sober expression the whole time. She would occasionally glance at Alan only to look away the second their eyes met.

Fio worriedly glanced at the storage room.

"All right, I'll talk to her," said Alan.

“Ah! Thank you so much,” Fio said as she bowed deeply, breasts swaying. Then her cheeks turned pink, though she knew what she had to say. “And um, if possible, I’d like you to... Well, I’d like you to shovel her. I think it’d make her happy.”

“Er...”

“I-I’m sorry if I’m overstepping my bounds!”

Before Alan could ask what “shovel” meant in this specific instance, Fio turned and fled while murmuring to herself, her cheeks glowing.

Alan thought to himself for a moment before whispering: “I don’t get it.”

At this point, Alan couldn’t wrap his head around any of the Shovel Princess’s desires. Even so, he knew for a fact that he couldn’t leave her as she was. He didn’t want to.

He gripped the shovel on his back. Alan had no idea what to do—however.

No matter what, I can still shovel.

Inside the storage room on the third floor of the World Tree Castle, a host of shovels were lined in a row.

Alan normally used an adamantine shovel, but he had a ton of spares. Fio kept each of them on an individual stand, almost like they were on display at a museum.

No matter where Alan looked, Lithisia was nowhere to be found. Where could she be hiding?

While searching, Alan passed the shovel stands. One of them had signage that read, “Mythril Shovel.” The next read, “Orichalcum Shovel,” then, “Ruby Shovel,” and finally, the “Princess Shovel,” which sat next to the window—

“...”

Alan stopped and turned back to that last shovel to study it again.

The self-proclaimed Princess Shovel sat on a platform against the wall. In extremely feminine handwriting, the placard below it read, “A perfectly average

shovel, but it would be immensely pleased if used.” On the “shovel’s” ample breasts hung a sign with a downward pointing arrow that read, “Shovel.”

There were also instructions:

- USAGE AREA: Anywhere
- USAGE TIME: Any time
- USER: Sir Miner exclusively
- ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: New, unused.

But will do its best, so please use it.

“ ...”

Alan felt a headache begin to take shape. This, here in front of him, was what Fio had been unable to put it into words.

Lithisia sat on the platform in her Princess Dress (mini-skirt form), her plump thighs exposed, her cheeks blushing, and her eyes ever so slightly open.

“ ...”

She glanced at Alan, then immediately closed her eyes.

“I’m a shovel. A shovel...” Lithisia whispered to herself, her hands clasped together in prayer.



What the hell is up with this adorable little shovel? Alan thought to himself.
“Lithisia.”

ZIIING!

Upon being called by her name, the Princess Shovel (self-proclaimed) trembled.

“...!!!”

But she still said nothing. She kept her eyes shut and her quivering hands clasped together. “I’m a shovel, I’m a shovel,” she whispered to herself over and over.

Alan only picked up this mantra thanks to his Shovel Ear. To all other observers, Lithisia would have looked just like a sleeping princess, but in fact, she was trying her hardest to become a real shovel.

I don’t get it. This was the second time today Alan had thought that to himself. *But even if I don’t understand, I promised to do what I can. Shovel.*

And so, Alan picked up the Princess Shovel in his arms in a classic princess carry.

“Ah...” For just a moment, Lithisia let out a sound, but she quickly shook her head and began to work her, uh, magic. She stretched out the fingers on both of her hands to form a triangle. A familiar shape—almost like a shovel head, in fact.

“...”

Was she asking Alan to use her to shovel something? With her hands? Should he? She evidently desired it.

Alan nearly shifted his position, but he paused upon seeing her hands up close. The thin white fingers of a young lady. They were so beautiful. Too beautiful, almost.

“Lithisia, stop this.”

“Huh...?”

“You’ll hurt your fingers and damage your nails. If you’re going to dig

something up, use a regular shovel.”

“Ah, um, er.” Lithisia stared blankly at Alan. “I’m a shovel. Um, please feel free to use me as you w-wish.”

“Stop this nonsense. How could I possibly use such beautiful hands to dig things up?”

“Eee!”

Swish!

The Shovel Princess’s cheeks immediately pinked.

“Ah, uuurh, I-I’m sorry...” The Shovel Princess apologized with tears streaming down her cheeks. No, this was no Shovel Princess. This was just Lithisia. She was human. But why was she apologizing? “I-I’m so sorry, I’m a failure of a shovel...”

Lithisia’s profound sadness caused Alan nothing but confusion. *I just don’t understand her. What is she thinking?*

He concluded that he had to ask her directly. “Lithisia, could you please tell me what’s going on?”

“Ack!”

“If you don’t want to say, I can’t force you. But I like you most when you’re happily shoveling.”

“?!?!?!?!?”

ZIIING!

“EEEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

The second Alan said “I like you,” Lithisia’s heart rate multiplied significantly.

It was over. She had lost. Lithisia’s challenge ended in failure. She was no longer a shovel, but rather a simple young maiden in love—even though she had tried so hard to bury that part of herself.

“Eeeeeeee! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

In the end, unable to hide anything from Alan, Lithisia confessed everything to

him.

“I’m so, so sorry... I’m the worst, just a shovel failure of a human...”

Lithisia had seen Alan digging Catria’s ears, overheard their conversation, and grown terribly jealous. But she didn’t want to cause trouble for Alan by whining, so she had decided to become a Princess Shovel. If she could only turn her heart into a shovel, she wouldn’t be jealous of Catria anymore, and her awful jealousy wouldn’t cause problems for Alan.

“B-but I couldn’t do it.”

Lithisia had failed. When Alan drew close and called out to her, she had wanted him to shovel her like nothing else. In the end, Lithisia was no shovel; she was just a young lass.

“I see...” Having listened to the princess’s tale, Alan thought quietly to himself.

Truth be told, there was a lot about her story that he didn’t understand. Why did she want to be shoveled like no tomorrow? Why was she jealous of Catria? But at the end of the day, Alan had vowed to do everything within his power for Lithisia, which meant there was but one thing for him to do now.

Alan held Lithisia in his arms and sat her down on the floor of the storage room, her head on his thighs.

“Eeee!”

The miner felt Lithisia’s body warmth through her beautiful golden hair, which fell across his knees. Alan inspected the inside of her ear but found nothing at all; it was extremely clean in there. At this rate, he wouldn’t be able to pick her ears.

“U-um, Sir Miner?!” Confusion rang in Lithisia’s voice. She couldn’t wrap her head around what was happening to her. Why was he holding her in his lap? He had already said he would never marry her. She’d been dumped before anything even started. It was as if he had no need for a princess who couldn’t become a shovel. Sure, he’d never said that directly, but this was how his words had translated in Lithisia’s mind.

“Hrm, there’s no point in cleaning your ears...”

“Ah, er, um, right...” On hearing Alan’s words, Lithisia’s confusion finally dissipated. Instead, a wave of sadness flowed over her. *It’s fine. I knew this would happen. I knew my body wasn’t worth shoveling—*

“All right. Instead, let’s do your mouth.”

“Wha?”

Quicker than the eye could see, Alan modified his Fluoride Care Shovel into toothbrush form. He grasped Lithisia tightly with his left hand to make sure she wouldn’t flee. Her bountiful breasts pressed up against his arm, causing Lithisia to squeal. But Alan wouldn’t loosen his grip.

Alan had vowed to do everything he could for this young woman. He held Lithisia in his arms like a baby and worked open her mouth.

Brush, brush.

“Eeeeeek!”

Brush, brush.

“No talking. Don’t worry, just stay still.”

Brush, brush.

Alan dug into Lithisia’s mouth. More specifically, he got at her teeth. He used his masterful shovel technique to brush all of the teeth in her mouth, one after the other, in true deep-cleaning fashion. He got every last bit of grime off of Lithisia’s already pristine whites.

Alan then placed his Mirror Shovel directly in front of them. Reflected in the mirror, Lithisia was held like a small baby as Alan scoured her mouth.

“Ah, eee, nnnngh.”

Alan was shoveling her mouth...

Lithisia made a point to brush her teeth every morning and night, yet her mouth now overflowed with euphoria. Her teeth weren’t connected to any pleasure nerves, yet each time the Toothbrush Shovel scraped over one of them, her *maidenly* nerves electrified. Her body twitched in pleasure, causing

Alan to hold her even more tightly.

What's going on? It feels so good. I'm being happily shoveled...

There was no way for Lithisia to resist.

Brush, brush.

Brush, brush.

Swoosh, swoosh.

“Nnnnngh!”

Alan got between her teeth with a Thread Shovel. Everything in Lithisia's mouth, even her mucous membranes, belonged to him now. That pleasure, that joy, tore her chest apart—the very same chest now pressed against Alan.

It was too much. Lithisia was on the verge of tears. If Alan kept being this kind to her, soon she'd be unable to live without Alan's shovel.

“Eeeeeaaaaaaaaah...”

Finally, after deftly brushing the teeth in the back of her mouth, Alan's hand came to a stop. The whole thing only lasted three minutes, but they were the most joyous minutes of Lithisia's life.

The princess struggled to catch her breath. It was over. It was finally over. She wanted Alan to keep going, but... But...

“All right. Next are your upper teeth.”

“HUH?!”

Another three minutes later, Lithisia, now drenched in sweat, fell limp. Her arms and thighs glistened like those of a girl who'd just finished practicing her favorite sport, and her cheeks shone brightly red. The only things on her mind were Alan and his shovel.

Sir Miner. Love. Shovel. Love. Stay with me forever. Shovel me forever. Those words ran on repeat. However— *No, I can't! I mustn't!*

Lithisia used the last of her strength to resist the desire threatening to drown her. She couldn't tell Alan these things; she would cause him a great many problems if she did. It wasn't like he loved her or anything, and it wasn't as if he

planned to marry her. If she told him she loved him, he would only be troubled by it.

Lithisia clenched her fists in resistance.

Then Alan gently ran the palm of his hand across her head, over and over.

“Ah...”

Once again, hope rose deep within Lithisia. Maybe she had simply misheard him? Maybe he hadn’t said anything about not marrying her?

The truth of the matter was that she felt an immense amount of love in the hand running across her head, as well as in the arm holding her so very tightly. Both were so tender, and they felt so good... Alan had even shoveled her mouth.

“Ah... Mmm...”

Lithisia wanted to ask him, but she couldn’t. She was too scared. She feared she would die on the spot if Alan told her he didn’t “shovel” her.

But when Lithisia looked up at Alan’s face, she found him wearing a smile that seemed to say he’d accept anything and everything. In that case, Lithisia mustered up more courage than she ever had in her entire human—or perhaps shovel—life.

“Um, Sir Miner...”

“Yeah?”

She was going to ask him. She was going to do it. This was her chance! “Um, would you... Um, would you sh...”

Would you shovel me forever?

Just as she was about to lay it all on the line—

BOOOM.

“Long time no see, Princess Lithisia!”

A video feed of Prime Minister Zeleburg appeared before the pair in a display formed by communication magic.

“ ... ”

A Shovel Aura of deep sadness emanated from Lithisia.

“How goes your hunt for the orbs?” Zeleburg asked. “I come to you today to provide you all with a piece of information that might help: the location of the Purple Orb! Where do you think it is? Hee hee hee... Why, it lies in Hell itself— wait, why are you holding Princess Lithisia in your arms?!”

“Zeleburg, perfect timing,” said Alan. “We’re heading to Rostir now.”

“What? Who the hell are you? More importantly, get away from my Princess Lithisia—” Zeleburg broke off. His gaze had turned to Lithisia and his expression changed to one of astonishment. “What? Um, er... A toothbrush?”

Zeleburg was bewildered. Apparently even demons could get confused.

“Ze...burg...!”

The air surrounding Lithisia froze as she spoke. Her voice throbbed with tears. She’d been *interrupted*. She wanted to cry. She had squeezed out every last bit of courage she had, and this was what she got in return? She would never let Zeleburg get away with this. Her deep sadness morphed into pure rage, and with a toothbrush still in her mouth, Lithisia spoke.

“ZELEBURF, I’MF NEBA GUIN TUH FOHGIFF YOO FORF BIS!!!”

But thanks to the toothbrush in her mouth, she was a bit hard to understand.

“ ... ”

For a time, Zeleburg simply stared at Lithisia, his eyes widened. Then he put his hand on his chin.

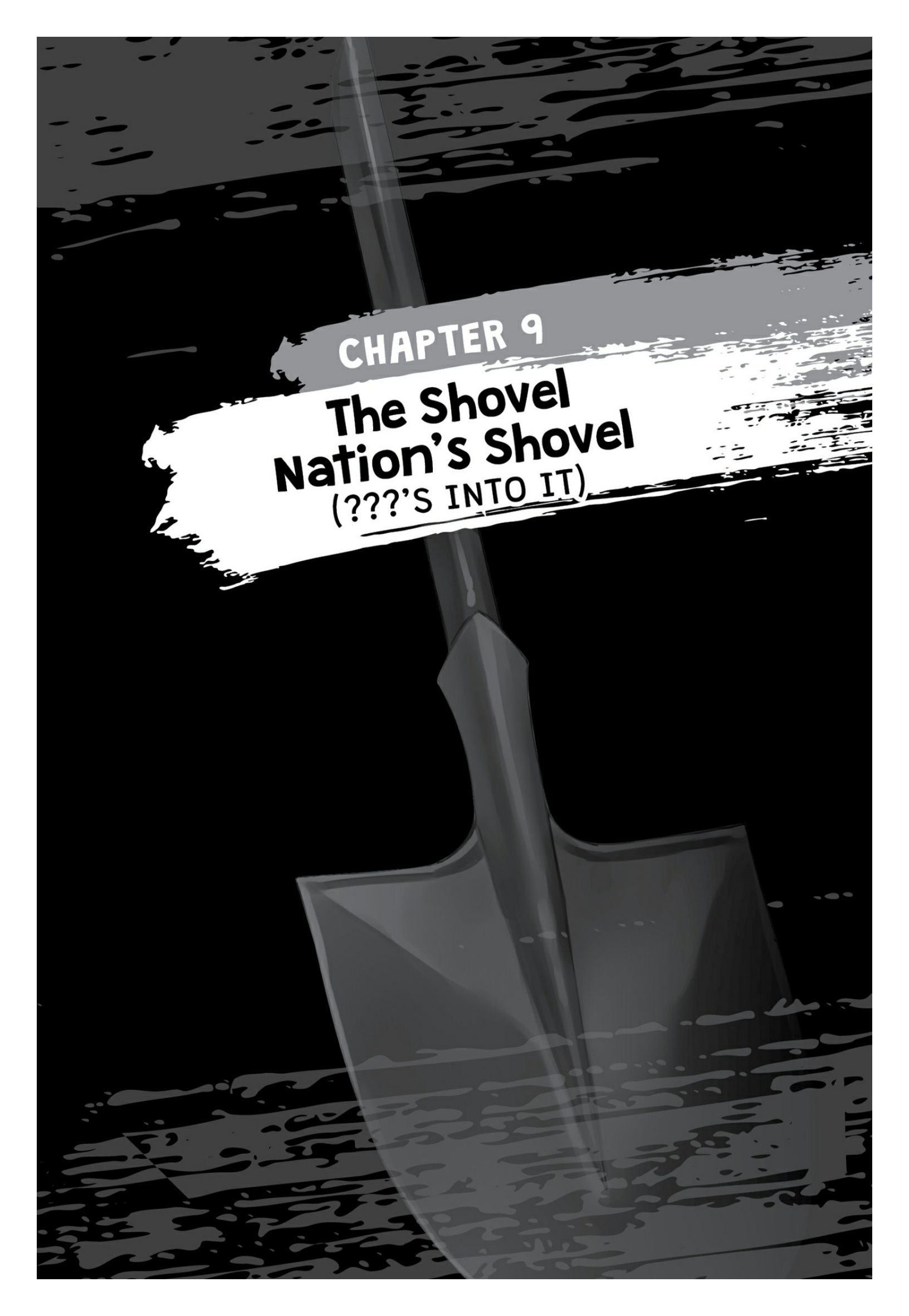
“Adorable... How very adorable, Your Highness,” he said, his voice racked with emotion.

Tragically, Alan found himself agreeing with the heinous villain.

Still coddled in Alan’s arms, Lithisia glared at Zeleburg, and in the loudest voice yet of the day, she screamed. “ZELEBURG, I’MF NEBA GUIN TUH FORHIF YOO!!!”

Thus went the opening declaration of the First Rostir Elimination War: The

Shovel Rebellion, as it would be recorded in the history books.

A black and white illustration of a shovel stuck into a dark, textured surface. A white, torn-edge title card is attached to the handle of the shovel. The card contains the chapter title and subtitle. The shovel's head is visible at the bottom, partially buried in the dark material.

CHAPTER 9

The Shovel Nation's Shovel

(???'S INTO IT)

Part 48:

The Lady Knight Strengthens Her Resolve to Become a Hero

ALAN, LITHISIA, AND CATRIA STOOD in the grassy field as the cool breeze blew by them.

They were ready to commence Operation NFZ: Never Forgive Zeleburg. Needless to say, Lithisia had come up with the name. At present, she stood stiffly in place with tears in her eyes, and Alan couldn't help but be impressed by her raw emotion. She truly was the princess of a great nation. Her love for her country had to be on a completely different level.

Alan didn't realize that she was simply furious that her shofession ("sho"vel con"fession") had been interrupted.

Now, the three looked upon the seven orbs placed at their feet. The original mission objective had been to use the orbs in order to wish for Zeleburg's defeat. However, there was a slight snag.

"The orbs aren't activating?" asked Alan.

"Correct..." Lithisia sadly nodded. She frowned at the orbs, looking puzzled. "No matter how hard I wish for Zeleburg's defeat, they shine weakly, and only for a moment."

Lithisia had tried this multiple times with no luck.

"And you're sure this is how they're supposed to be activated?"

"A person who bears the blood of the Rostir royal family has only to wish it and they will activate."

"A person who bears the blood of the royal family... A person...?"

Alan and Catria turned their gaze upon Lithisia.

A person.

"Um, what's the shovmatter?"

Well, in that case, it was no wonder that the orbs wound up being a dead end.

“Does Lithisia have any siblings?” asked Alan.

“No, she’s an only child,” said Catria.

And so the person-based (i.e., human, not shovel) bloodline of the Rostir royal family came to an end.

“Well, it is what it is. I guess we’ll just have to beat Zeleburg the regular way,” said Alan, and he grasped his shovel.

“Then what was the point of our orb-collecting quest?”

The party felt like they could hear Alice’s question from all the way at the World Tree Castle, where she had elected to stay, but they chose to ignore it. Plus, the vibes they were getting from the princess suggested she wasn’t particularly hung up on using the orbs. She just wanted to crush Zeleburg no matter how they did it.

“How should we start, Lithisia?” Alan asked. As this was a battle to regain Lithisia’s nation, he planned to follow her directions.

“First, could you please eliminate the capital city with your Wave Motion Shovel Blast?”

“Understood.”

“EXCUSE ME?!” Catria stepped in to stop Alan as he casually lifted his shovel.

Lithisia seemed baffled by her knight’s response and frowned at her. “Catria, this is the fastest way to end the conflict with the least amount of sacrifices. Next-Generation Shovel Warfare.”

“Don’t call the population of the entire capital city a sacrifice! Alan, what are you thinking, saying yes to that?!”

“Don’t worry. The beam would only bury the humans. I could just dig them back up.”

Catria’s words caught in her throat. *Then that makes this okay? Like hell it does!*

“Wait, then what happens to the buildings? People’s clothes?”

“They all get blown away.”

“Are you trying to return us to the Stone Age?!”

“If Lithisia so desires it.”

Rostir was Catria’s home. Her beloved home, even. She couldn’t let it be corrupted by the shovel. “E-either way, rethink this, okay?! Rostir is a beautiful nation!”

“Hrm, if you say so...”

“Shovel!”

As a result of this back and forth, the party decided to scope out the city first.

Rostir’s capital city was said to be the most exquisite on the continent. From upon the grassy hills where the wind blew, one could see the shining white palace in the distance, surrounded by the gorgeous city.

If I show its beauty to Alan, even he’ll change his mind! He has to! Catria held desperately to this thought as she climbed the hill. However, upon reaching the summit—

DA-DOOOOOOOOOM!

She beheld a demonic castle. Cascades of lightning struck all over its walls and turrets. Rostir’s pearlescent palace was no more; it had been replaced with this vile structure, a hideous castle that pierced the very heavens. Loathsome gargoyles flew around this black stone monument, crying out into the sky.

The Dark Palace. Rostir’s palace had transformed into the grim castle of legends. At the top of this castle rose an unsettling triangular tower.

What the hell?

“Zeleburg’s doing, no doubt.” Alan hefted his shovel.

Catria couldn’t stop him this time. How could she claim that this—this *city*, was her home?

We should just blow it away and be done with it... Wait, is it just me, or are my thoughts being corrupted by the shovel? Aren’t I just siding with Alan because

he cleaned my ears and it kinda sorta felt a little good?

As Catria held this internal debate with herself, it was, for some reason, Lithisia who took action.

“Pl-please wait, Sir Miner. Um, c-could you leave one building intact?”

“Hrm... Firing my shovel with that kind of accuracy will take time.”

“You just need time?!” Catria wailed.

“I see... Aw...” Lithisia fidgeted, occasionally glancing at the castle with indecision.

Catria couldn’t help but be impressed. Even though Rostir had been taken over by Zeleburg, seeing her homeland even in this state had reminded the princess of her devotion to her country.

“Um, but, if you could, Sir Miner...”

“It’s a no on the Wave Motion Shovel Blast, yeah?”

“I’m sho, sho shorry. I just...” Lithisia pointed at the Dark Palace, specifically the triangular tower. Her eyes sparkled. “I just really want to modify that into the Sholace (shovel palace)!”

A powerfully sharp headache instantly overtook Catria.

“We can paint it over in gray, and if we chisel the sides a little bit, it’ll look like a shovel from far away. Our nation’s symbol!” Lithisia’s eyes glistened. She was already thinking about what they would do after taking back her country.

“That’s why, um, I’d like you to leave the castle as-is. Let’s just storm the front door with your shovel.”

“Roger that.”

Catria sighed deeply. She felt like an idiot for even thinking this would go differently. At the end of the day, the princess thought only of shovels.

“Oh, and Catria?” said Lithisia.

“Yes?!” The lady knight trembled when the princess called her name.

“There seems to be a battle taking place near the fortress you used to be stationed at in the southwest.”

“A battle?”

“The wind told my shovel,” said Lithisia. “Please go save them.”

“Hooooold on a second.”

Everything about that sentence was weird. And anyway, there was no need for Catria to hurry when Alan could basically just warp to the fortress using the ground and fire off his Wave Motion Shovel Blast. The fight would be over in a second.

But Lithisia smiled. “Go show the captain just how much you’ve grown.”

“Huh?”

“Show your old comrades, the people who looked down on you, how strong you’ve become.” Lithisia raised her red shovel into the wind. “Show them the true strength of Rostir’s most powerful knight!”

I’m...the most powerful knight?

As Catria stood dumbfounded, Alan made his move. He tapped his shovel on the ground and checked the vibrations. “Hrm, there does in fact appear to be a battle taking place to the southwest. Hundreds of people have taken to the field.”

“Hundreds? Th-that’s no mere scuffle. That’s all-out war! How could I change anything?”

“You would change everything,” said Alan definitively.

“Eh?!”

“Catria, go become the hero you’re destined to be. You already have the power you require.”

Alan of all people told Catria this. *That* Alan.

Could she really do it?

Can I actually stop a massive battle like some kind of hero of legend? Sure, I pulled off something similar in the Light Nation, but that was in the tunnels beneath the ground, where Shovel Power is strongest. Plus, the enemy were demons, who are weak to holy power. That’s completely different from doing

battle in a field under the open sky.

But for some reason, a mysterious sense of courage bubbled up inside Catria as she gripped her Holy Knight Blade. The sword sheathed within the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia told her she could do it.

Can I really? No, that's not right... I'm the only one who can do it! At last, I'm going to be the most powerful knight in all the land!

"A-all right, I understand. I'll—huagh?!"

Suddenly Arcadia's alarm began to ring, causing Catria to freeze in place. She mechanically turned around. It was the warning alerting her that she was in need of a daily Anti-Shovel Power recharge.

"Catria," said Alan.

"Ah! Alan, n-no, please. Stay away!"

Catria held her hands over her ears and backed up. This was bad. She couldn't handle an action so delightful on top of this wonderful hilltop. Plus, they were right in front of the princess. How could she let Alan dig her ears while she rested her head on his lap under these circumstances? If she let him do that, she knew without a doubt that something deep inside of her would be completely corrupted by the shovel.

But her heart beat a mile a minute, and her cheeks remained bright red.

This is bad, bad, bad, bad!

"Oh gosh, my ears. My ears are—no!" Catria raised her voice like a child, but she couldn't resist. Just imagining the sensation in her ears being shoveled put her over the edge.

Swoosh, swoosh. Poking away at the insides of her ears.

"Don't worry," said Alan. "Since I cleaned your ears yesterday, we're doing something different today."

"Wha?" Catria relaxed for a moment, though a creeping disappointment began to—

Fwoop!

Something plunged up her nose.

“?!”

“Stay still. You’ve been crying so much that you’re all plugged up in there.”

Alan used a soft, twisted-up tissue shaped like a shovel to dig deep into Catria’s nose. He moved the Tissue Shovel around her mucous membrane, cleaning away the filth within Catria. There was a lot to clean away, considering all she’d done as of late was cry.

Fwoop, fwoop.

Alan held her tightly from behind to make sure she didn’t freak out while he cleaned away.

“Ah, eee, nnggh!”

Fwoop, fwoop, fwoop.

Alan is having his way with the dirtiest part of my face. What’s going on? What’s happening? This is way worse than what he did to my ears!

“Perfect, recharge complete.”

“Nnnnngh!”

And so Alan pulled out the Tissue Shovel while Catria held down her nose and breathed heavily.

This is bad. Completely bad. That shoveling just now was—

“Ah, ahhh, uuuuugh.”

Even more embarrassing than when he cleaned my ears!

“Now then, back to business.” Alan patted Catria on the shoulders as she shook with shame. “Get out there and be a hero.”

As if I could right now?! You big dummy! Catria thought to herself.

She’d been embraced by a man, had her nose picked, and now the culprit himself was telling her to go be a hero all willy-nilly? Seriously? But Catria couldn’t voice her complaints. All she could do was sniffle up her remaining snot as she cried.

“Uuuuugh.”

“You have a handkerchief, yeah?”

It was plain as day that he was treating her like a child. This sucked. As for what specifically sucked, it was the fact that his treatment and care made her even a little bit happy.

She had just decided to go and be a hero, too.

Uuugh, I’m not going down like this! Catria gripped her Holy Knight Blade and once again steeled her resolve. She wasn’t going to the battlefield in order to show her old comrades how much stronger she’d become. She needed to show *Alan*.

Alan, when this is all over, the first thing I’m gonna do is pick your nose with all my might!

“Wait, what the hell am I thinking?!”

“Hurry up and get going.”

Three minutes later, Lithisia secretly started blowing her nose. It stung like crazy, but she kept it secret from Alan. If he found out about her uncouth behavior and unbecoming desires, it would cause all kinds of trouble for him.

“I’m so jeavel (jealous + shovel)…”

However, she was immediately found out.

“Lithisia, get over here.”

“Shovel?! ”

On top of that breezy hill near the Rostir capital city, a happy little princess had all sorts of things picked and cleaned.

This was the scene three days before Rostir was wiped from the face of the continent.

Part 49:

The Lady Knight Becomes the Dragon-Slaying Hero

CATRIA STOOD ALONE in a windswept field.

About three hundred meters before her lay a town, the very same town the party had stopped at on the way to the Elf Woods not so long ago. Her old brigade currently surrounded said town. According to Princess Lithisia, they had been brainwashed to believe that rebels hid within it.

Over one hundred knights in total... A full-blown army. Even worse, this army consisted of Rostir's best and brightest.

How can I possibly fight an entire army on my own?

Catria gripped her Holy Knight Blade and courage flared up from within her. Alan, that shovel-incarnate superhuman of a man, had made this sword for her. And Catria had decided to become a knight worthy of the blade.

<Don't hesitate, Catria. Do what you must!>

She cheered herself on in her mind, and as she did, it was as though she could hear Alan do the same. Catria smiled. To think she'd started to hear things. Even deep within her heart, she relied on Alan.

<Oh, and hurry up. They're going to attack soon.>

What a specific thing to imagine hearing.

Wait, his voice is way too clear!

"Hey..."

<What's wrong, Catria?>

"Don't you give me that! Y-you're the one who told me to go and become a hero on my own!"

<My apologies, but I wanted to see you in action as up close and personally as I could.> "Huh?"

<You're a vein of talent I mined up myself. What's the point if I don't get to watch you in action in person?> Catria's heartbeat suddenly sped up.

<That's why I followed along in secret. Forgive me, Catria.>

"Er, um, r-really? Hrm."

I see... So Alan followed me. He wanted to watch me in action. Huh.

Catria neglected to notice her own grin.

<Don't let your guard down, Catria,> Alan said sternly. <I won't be helping you. I'm currently an invisible man.> "An invisible man? What's that supposed to mean? You sure you don't mean invisible shovel?" Catria was certain Alan had made a slip of the tongue.

<No. I don't have a shovel with me right now.>

"What?"

<I left my shovel behind. I've got nothing on me. If things look bad for you, I won't be able to step in.> KA-BOOOOOOOOOM!

"WHAAAA?!" Catria was bowled over by what felt like a weapon—not a shovel—colliding with her head. *He* left his shovel behind? Alan did? Had hell frozen over? "Wh-why would you do that?!"

<In order to be here for you when you break out on your own, I used Stealth Shovel to obtain stealth abilities.> "How are those two things related on any level?!"

<By cutting some letters, I'm able to hide the true meaning of things, therefore hiding myself.> What was he going on about now? None of this made any sense. Nevertheless, Catria tried her best to put it together. That was when she noticed the pair of *shoes* (*sho[v]e[l]s*) standing in roughly the direction Alan's voice was coming from.

"..."

Catria was assaulted by a wave of understanding.

<The main weakness of this technique is that my shoes don't turn invisible with me. Hm? What's wrong, Catria?> "I don't even care anymore. Fine, no help. Got it."

Catria somehow managed to mentally overcome everything that had just

transpired just as she heard a whistle being blown—a shrill cry, one she was all too familiar with. This was the sign for the knights to attack.

No good. Catria dashed forward.

Urgh, I'm not gonna make it at this rate!

Approximately a thousand feet separated Catria and the knights. She could fire her Justice Stream at any time, but it lacked power at this range. She panicked, fearing the situation hopeless.

However, even in hopeless situations, Alan made the impossible possible. If Alan faced this problem, he'd solve it quick as anything.

At this range, huh?

"If it's too far—I should be able to 'fill' the distance!" Catria cried out, unconsciously grasping the hilt of her Holy Knight Blade. As she did—
SHWIIIIIIING!

"Huh?"

For a moment, Catria was blinded by white light. When she could once more see, she found she had instantaneously changed location.

"What...?"

Catria blinked rapidly. Weird, much? The army a thousand feet away from her now loomed right in front of her very eyes. Before her stood a veteran knight with a huge beard: Captain Lancelot. He looked right at her.

No, wait, what the hell? I was so far away. Why is the army right here?! Catria thought. "Alan! What did you do?!"

But Alan (currently in stealth mode) simply kicked the dirt with his visible shoes. "Nothing. You're the one who performed a most excellent Showarp."

"A Showarp?!"

"The act of 'filling in' the distance between you and your target."

Catria's jaw almost hit the ground. *No, wait. Hold on a second. I did nothing of the sort. I did not Showarp!*

All she had done was grip her Holy Knight Blade, if somewhat unconsciously,

and think about filling in the distance— “You’re the traitor, Catria! Where did you come from?!” Captain Lancelot bellowed, interrupting her thoughts. The captain’s voice was piercingly hostile. The knights surrounding him recovered from their confusion and took up battle stances facing Catria.

Now wasn’t the time to bicker with Alan!

Catria unsheathed her Holy Knight Blade and stood off against Captain Lancelot. His glowing red eyes locked on to her with killing intent.

Those eyes aren’t normal. He’s being controlled by someone—or something!

In other words, there was a mystery to uncover here, and Catria had to figure it out. At that moment, Catria remembered how they had solved the puzzles in the pyramid.

“The pyramid...?”

Back then, what did Alan do? Catria focused, racking her brain. *That’s right, Alan wrote it into the ground and...*

While Catria retraced her memories, she mimicked Alan’s actions in real-time, writing into the dirt with the tip of her sword: “how to undo the captain’s brainwashing.”

Immediately, answering words appeared in the dirt: “The man in front wearing a purple robe is a demon. Defeat him.”

Catria instantly “filled in” the distance between herself and the purple-robed man and smacked him with her sword.

“GAAAAAAAAAH!”

SWOOOSH!

Catria’s single blow sent the purple-robed man flying into a mountain far on the horizon.

Alan applauded Catria’s good work. <A wonderful strike, if I do say so myself. You buried him in the mountain, right?> “Yeah, thanks... Wait, wait waaaaaiiit!” Catria’s concentration finally broke, leading to her scream. *Hold on! What the hell did I just do?!*

<A perfect shovlauncher. To be honest, I'm really impressed.>

"Gaaaaaah! N-no, that's not it! I used my sword, not a shovel!"

<It doesn't matter what you use. I just want to see more of your stunning skills.> "Wha?!" Catria's heartbeat grew louder.

<You're the absolute best right now, Catria.>

BADUMP, BADUMP, BADUMP!

Why is my heart reacting like this to a shovel man like him of all people? No, he isn't actually a shovel right now. So it's more like Shovel Man - Shovel = Man. It's completely normal for a woman to find her heart fluttering because of a man. That's a common thing. In other words, I can feel love and attraction toward Alan and do all kinds of things with him and— "Wait, NOOOO! What am I thinking?!?!?!?" Catria shook her head furiously in an attempt to wash away the steamy thoughts taking over her mind. *Something's wrong with me! This is all Alan's fault!*

"Ugh... Where...am I? Ergh... Knight Catria, is that you?!" Captain Lancelot's mind control had been broken, and he blinked at his surroundings, bewildered.

Catria, flustered, dashed up to him. The captain had overseen her training and been a great help to her in the past. "C-Captain, are you all right? You were being controlled by a demon!"

"A demon, you say? Ugh... I see... I remember interrogating Zeleburg in the capital, and then..."

"You're back to normal?"

Lancelot nodded, tentatively at first, and then with greater certainty. He began to explain, as best he could, what had happened to him and the others. About how dark clouds had covered Rostir, and how his own investigation had led him to discover that Prime Minister Zeleburg was behind it all. Finally, he described how he had attempted to take down the man himself only to be defeated and subsequently brainwashed, sent out to capture Princess Lithisia under the watchful eye of a demon handler.

"Gaaah!" The moment he finished explaining everything, Lancelot gripped his

chest in pain.

“Captain?!”

“I’m quite surprised a mere human could see through my control.” A creepy voice echoed throughout Catria’s mind, and it sure as hell wasn’t Alan’s.

Catria scanned her surroundings and found another robed man in the crowd of knights. He looked like a court mage, but the murderous intent radiating from him was anything but normal. Perhaps most obviously, two horns stuck out from his head.

This demon was the captain’s handler, and his power far exceed that of the demon from earlier.

“You! You’re one of Zeleburg’s stooges!” Catria instinctively gripped her Holy Knight Blade.

The court mage floated into the air. “You are a threat. And as such, I must use all the power at my disposal.”

The demon’s hands drew complex patterns in the air, summoning a dimensional slit far above him in the sky. A crimson mountain emerged from the opening—or at least that’s what it looked like to Catria. The living creature entering their dimension was so large that nobody could be faulted for thinking it a geographic wonder unto itself.

It was, in fact, a colossal red dragon.

“SUMMON DRAGONLORD!” cried the demon.

GRRRROOOOOOOOOOAAAAWWRR!!!

The dragon roared into the air.

“Wha?!”

<Catria, it’s coming! Prepare yourself!>

At Alan’s warning, Catria raised her Holy Knight Blade. The dragon’s evil aura swept through the air as it flapped its wings. No doubt it would soon unleash its dragon breath, but would Catria be able to dodge in time? Even if she escaped, the rest of the knights would fall.

Her only option was to defeat the dragon, just as Alan once had in the desert.

Can I really do something like that?

The dragon readied its fierce breath as its tremendous wingspan blocked the very sky.

“Grr, what incredible force...!”

This was bad. Catria already feared victory impossible to achieve. She now faced a dragon, after all. Humans couldn’t beat dragons. On instinct, Catria turned to Alan in the hopes that he would step in to save her, but her gaze fell upon the set of shoes and the entire lack of visible man filling them. Even they seemed to tremble faced with the beast’s immensity.

Crap! That’s right! He doesn’t have a shovel on him right now, just a pair of shoes. Useless—no, wait.

A chill ran down Catria’s spine as dread washed over her. Alan had told her that he was, at present, powerless. It was certainly a fact that all he seemed to have on his person were a measly pair of shoes. Easily destructible shoes, no less.

Did that mean that, if Alan took the dragon’s breath head-on, the shoes would be destroyed and he would die?

“UGH!!!”

Just as Catria imagined this, the dragon let rip a torrent of fiery breath, a storm of flames.

The lady knight lunged between Alan and the dragon and held her blade before her. She now knew what she had to do.

I’m the only one who can fight back!

“JUSTICE STREEAAAM!!!”

Catria fired a massive blast of energy from her Holy Knight Blade, and it collided with the dragon’s flaming breath. The two energy waves struggled against one another, pushing back and forth, but all too soon, Catria’s blast began to lose ground.

She needed more power. She gripped her blade even more tightly, but it wasn't enough; Catria couldn't control the wave blast's recoil.

Nonetheless, she grit her teeth.

I have to do this. I promised myself I'd protect them. I made that promise!

<Catria, your scabbard!> Alan called out.

My scabbard? She gasped. "That's right!"

Catria reached to the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia at her back and touched it. "INVINCIBLE!" she howled.

With this power, she could negate all damage she took for thirty seconds—and just like that, the Justice Stream's recoil felt like nothing at all. Catria poured even more power into her energy blast and shoved back the dragon's breath.

I'm going to be the protector this time!

"I'M GOING TO PROTECT ALAN!!!"

KA-CHOOOOOOOOOM!

The flow of energy tore through the sky, through the dragon breath, and enveloped the dragon in its entirety, almost as if a second sun had sprung to life over the planet. Catria thought this a familiar sight; it resembled Alan's Wave Motion Shovel Blast, one to one.

"Ngh..."

After a few seconds, the second sun dissipated. The dragon and the demon had been completely obliterated, leaving behind only a clear sky.

Catria simply stood in place. She had yet to fully comprehend what she had accomplished. Every member of the knight brigade stared straight at the lady knight...until one of them quietly whispered her name.

"Catria..."

Suddenly, her name spread throughout the crowd of knights, whispered ever more excitedly, until someone cried out.

"ALL HAIL CATRIA, THE DRAGON SLAYER!"

“Ah... Huh? What...?” Catria couldn’t quite make sense of what was happening.

Alan (still in stealth mode) made his way to her, and she felt him pat her on the back. She stiffened. For some reason, she got the feeling he was smiling.

<You did well, Catria.>

“Ah... Mm...” Warm tears streamed down Catria’s cheeks as she quivered. “Alan, I...”

Catria welled with the desire to embrace the invisible Alan, but her heart warned her against it. Humans did not embrace things they could not see with their own eyes. That was the act of a shovel.

Would she dare bend the knee to the shovel?

Yet despite her heart’s warnings, the desire to do so only grew. She could no longer stop herself.

Why should I? I mean, I’m a hero now. I worked so, so hard to overcome all the trials presented to me. It should be fine to do a little shoveling now, right?

“Alan!” Catria dropped her sword to the ground, and just as she was about to embrace the invisible man whose presence was indicated only by a pair of impossible shoes— Ding, ding, ding!

“Huh?”

The Holy Scabbard Arcadia rang its warning alarm.

SLUUUURP!

Suddenly, a shovel-shaped tentacle writhed out of the gemstone in the scabbard.

“Huh?”

<Hrmph, this must be because you used up its Anti-Shovel Power.>

“No, wait, pl-please! W-wait!”

But the tentacle did not wait.

With its shovel-shaped head, the tentacle began to prod at Catria’s clothing.

Out of the corner of Catria's eye, she glimpsed Captain Lancelot, eyes wide.

Catria's cheeks turned bright red, like they were about to explode. "N-no! Please, st-stop...!"

At this rate, she would be shoveled in front of some one hundred knights. A public shoveling. Anything but that!

But because Catria had used all of her power, she couldn't move fast enough to get away. Tears of despair filled her eyes.

"Catria!" shouted Alan.

The lady knight turned weakly to find Alan was no longer invisible. He held his ridiculous shoes in his left hand, and, focusing his power in his right, he fused the concept of the letter "V" and the letter "L" back into the footwear.

As Catria stood listlessly, Alan scooped her up like a princess. "Don't worry. I won't let that thing touch you."

His words pierced Catria's chest. *Oh, so he's going to save me? I knew I could count on Alan!*

"The only one who can shovel Catria..." Alan raised his shoes triumphantly in the air. "Is me!" he declared.

It would take some time before Catria realized the fate that awaited her.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

No matter how she struggled, Alan wouldn't release her.

It was in that moment that Catria's true trials began.

Part 50:

The Lady Knight and the Finest Act of Shoveling in All the Land

NOW ALAN STOOD in the windswept field, holding Catria like a princess.

“No, no, no!”

She was panicking like a small child, repeating herself over and over again. However, in order to replenish Arcadia’s Anti-Shovel Power, she had to be shoveled by Alan, and in front of the elite squad of knights led by her captain, no less. A public shoveling. The gaze of one hundred male knights settled on her.

“What’s going on?”

They seemed puzzled but intrigued.

Driven by instinct, Catria tried to hide her body with her hands. *No, I don’t want to be seen! I don’t want to be seen!!!*

“Please, Alan, no!” she begged. “Don’t do this to me! Don’t shovel me here! I don’t want it!” Catria’s cries grew more childish by the second.

Alan simply nodded. Her embarrassment and fear had gotten through to him. Catria usually protested shoveling, but a part of her clearly always took pleasure in the attention, and the two of them had developed a sort of silent agreement. Just as clearly, this time was different. The miner would never, ever do anything to Catria without her consent.

“Hm, but how should we handle this?” After all, Alan couldn’t just do nothing. If he abandoned Catria now, the tentacle would have its way with her. “All right. Fear not, Catria. I have an idea.”

“Eh? Alan!” Catria’s expression turned to one of joy and relief. *Amazing! Alan’s amazing! He really can do anything!*

“Let’s do the opposite.”

“Excuse me?”

Catria blinked rapidly while Alan reached down. He hefted her Holy Knight Blade off the ground and handed it to her.

“I’m not going to shovel you. You’re going to shovel me.”

ZING.

A lukewarm breeze blew through the field.

Alan’s logic was as such: In order to charge the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia’s Anti-Shovel Power, one had to resist the power of the shovel. However, these days, people other than Alan could wield a shovel—Catria herself, for example. In other words, if Catria shoveled someone else, she could still build resistance by fighting against her own Shovel Kickback. She only required a partner, as, if she tried to shovel herself or an object, the effects would balance out and come to nothing.

“I do think this is going to take longer than if I simply shoveled you, though. Are you okay with that?”

Catria nodded, her expression frantic. She really didn’t understand much about what Alan had just said, but she at least understood she had to shovel him. Catria also clung to the knowledge that she wouldn’t have to have her mouth, nose, ears, or other places shoveled publicly. In other words, it wouldn’t be that embarrassing at all!

Three minutes later, Catria found herself sitting on her knees, Alan’s head resting upon her soft thighs. This time, she was the one cleaning his ears.

“Er, ah, um. Wh-what big ears you have...” Catria’s trembling hands continued to clear out Alan’s ear.

Swoosh, swoosh.

“Mmph, yeah, right there. Ooh, you got a big one. This feels great, Catria.”

“I-It does? Good, good...”

First hold Alan’s head in your lap, then clean his ears... Simple enough, right?
But for some reason Catria’s heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

She'd be fine, she just needed to calm down. Plus, she was in control this time. No big deal. There was nothing embarrassing about this. Especially considering that, last time, she had been on the receiving end. But today, she wasn't being shoveled, and therefore, everything was totally fine.

"Haaah, haaah, haaah."

Badump, badump, badump.

"You're breathing heavily, Catria."

"I-It's nothing!"

Occasionally, Alan's breath ghosted over Catria's skin, but it was totally fine and no big deal at all! She was just sitting under the blue sky in an open field, Alan's head resting on her thighs as she shoveled him. Completely cool and whatever!

Something snapped within her.

Of course this is freaking embarrassing!

Catria had hit her limit (for the second time in two days.)

Meanwhile, the other knights kept saying the first things that came to their minds.

"Look how lovey-dovey they are."

"Jeez, way to rub it in."

"But why now?"

"I haven't the slightest. She just suddenly started cleaning his ear on the battlefield... Like a true hero."

Shut up!

But despite Catria's internal pushback, she couldn't argue with their point. No matter how you sliced it, she and Alan looked like a fawning couple. This was not, fundamentally, all that different from if she were being shoveled herself. In fact, it might actually be even more embarrassing that she was the one servicing Alan!

"AAAAGGGGGHHHH!"

Tears took shape in her eyes as her thighs tensed up.

Alan didn't miss a beat. "Are you okay, Catria?"

"Like hell I am! You big, dumb, stupid, dumb dummy!" Catria protested tearfully. But she didn't stop cleaning his ear. If she did, the scabbard's tentacle would come at her.

"Hrm, is this not working? I could always switch places with someone else."

"What?"

"You know some of the knights over there, don't you?"

Catria glanced at the knight brigade, every one of them a proud noble of Rostir. Catria had looked up to them all her life, which was what had prompted her to join the order in the first place.

But.

Catria gripped Alan's clothes. She didn't want anyone else. It had to be Alan.

She couldn't say as much, but her attitude made it clear. Being watched by the knights already embarrassed her so much that she could die, never mind letting any of them touch her bare skin.

"Men!" All of a sudden, Captain Lancelot rose to his feet. "Cover your eyes and ears!"

"Huh?"

"It is unbecoming of a knight to fail to give two lovers their privacy!"

Obedying their captain's orders, the entire brigade immediately covered their eyes and ears. In her heart, Catria protested: She and Alan weren't lovers—they all had the wrong idea! But at the end of the day, she was too relieved. Now it wouldn't be quite as bad—

"Shovel (anger)." Just then, a voice rattled through the air, almost as if it had pierced space itself. "Lancelot, I would kindly request that you not issue orders you are not qualified to give, shovel."

"Excuse me? Who—Princess Lithisia?!"

Lithisia stood there among the knights. Nobody knew when she had

appeared, but she was now right next to Lancelot. For some reason, she held a military flag decorated with an unfamiliar crest: the image of a knight wielding a massive shovel and riding another while bellowing “SHOVEL!”

Handmade, of course.

“This ritual marks the birth of the Holy Shovel Knights,” Lithisia declared. “We must watch no matter what.”

“Er, what?” said Lancelot.

“Catria is your captain. As the vice-captain, it is your duty to see this ritual through to the end.”

“Let me repeat myself: er, what?”

Lithisia brushed aside Lancelot’s confusion and smacked the ground with the haft of her shovel. When she did, every knight present stood at sudden attention, like they were the shovels that had been jabbed into the dirt.

“Urrrrrrgh, I-I can’t move my eyes!” Lancelot too was being controlled by the shovel.

“Once you have seen this ritual through to its end, you will have become respectable Shovel Knights,” said Lithisia.

The brigade’s gleaming eyes locked on Catria, unmoving.

This was literally the worst! The lady knight wanted to once more break down in tears. What was wrong with her mistress? And when the heck had she even arrived?

To Catria’s terrible regret, she realized Lithisia had probably been there since the beginning. She had likely seen everything. Lithisia of all people had seen what Catria did to Alan. All that good, deep shoveling. Princess Lithisia.

Right now, said princess sat on her knees in front of Lancelot. In other words, she had the best seat in the house to keep watching Catria and Alan.

“Pr-Princess?!”

Lithisia’s gaze was more businesslike and focused than any Catria had ever seen on her before. “Now then, Catria. You must show everyone your Shovel

Form as captain of the Holy Shovel Knights!”

The princess clenched her fists and kept her eyes glued to the pair as best she could, though eventually she began to anxiously rub her thighs together. Then she brought her hands to her ears and rubbed them lightly.

“Ah...”

She was extremely jealous.

“Lithisia?” said Alan.

“I-I’m fine, Sir Miner. Pl-please focus on Catria!”

“But—”

“A-as her mistress, I must burn her magnificent form into my own eyes!” Lithisia insisted, fire in her gaze.

“Mm.”

“This ritual must be seen through so Catria can become the leader of the Holy Shovel Knights!”

Lithisia’s deep understanding of her obligations as Catria’s mistress enabled her to keep her jealous maiden’s heart from doing anything rash. She was trying her very best. In any case, this also meant that even now she still recognized herself as the knight’s mistress, and she considered herself beholden to her duty in that role.

That meant Alan could not intervene. He had to focus himself entirely on getting shoveled by Catria! “You heard the lady, Catria. Keep going.”

“I heard her, but that doesn’t mean I understood her!” However, in the end, the scabbard-tentacle was scary, so Catria had to commit. “Eeek...”

And so the lady knight continued to clean Alan’s ear as Lithisia jealously watched on alongside the vice-captain of the knights, whose eyes glistened.

Catria continued her duty until she had finished, then blew gently into Alan’s ear. Upon this, Lithisia ordered Catria to massage his ear. Catria cried the entire time, but she never stopped moving her hands. She managed to withstand the intense gazes of one shovel (the princess) and one hundred men. She did it, and

she continued to do it up until the moment she completed her task.

“I-I’m done...” she huffed. Catria nearly fell over. Her cheeks burned crimson and her thighs were covered with sweat.

Once again, the other knights had their way with commentary.

“That was the most amazing ear cleaning I’ve ever seen.”

“It wasn’t ear cleaning. It was Ear *Shoveling*.”

“Dragon Slayer Catria’s Ear Shoveling.”

“All hail the Ear-Shoveling Hero, Catria!”

As usual, their comments became increasingly compromised by the shovel as time went on, but for once, Catria could pay them no heed.

I did it! I did...something? I’m not exactly sure what I did, but I feel like praising myself!

“That felt great, Catria,” said Alan, and he hummed to himself with pleasure.

“Ah.” Warmth built in the lady knight’s chest at Alan’s compliment. He had recognized her ability. Alan of all people had complimented her shoveling of his ear. *Wait, this is weird... No, just leave it alone, Catria. Soak in the feelings of happiness!*

Catria smiled brightly and Alan returned the expression.

“I’m counting on you for the other ear,” he said.

“E-excuse me?”

Ding, ding, ding!

As if on cue, the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia’s warning booted up.

“I had a feeling that one ear wouldn’t be enough,” Alan explained.

“H-huh?”

“Your Shovel Power is weaker than mine, so you’re going to have to do a little more digging.”

“Pardon?!”

“I said it before, didn’t I? This was gonna take more time if you did the digging.”

Take. More. Time.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!” Catria tearfully wailed with all of her might. But it was to no avail.

In the end, Catria found herself cleaning Alan’s other ear, swabbing his nose, and even brushing his teeth. Her trials didn’t stop there either. Even though Alan let out a pleased, “Aaah,” the scabbard’s warning didn’t go away, and she had to shovel his stomach. Still, the warning persisted. In the end, Catria could only make it stop by wearing Alan’s shoes for a moment.

“Ugh... They’re all warm...” Catria lay flat on the floor like a shovel that had just completed its objective.

Nearby, Lithisia’s face was covered in sweat as she staggered over. Despite her current condition, as Catria’s mistress, she somehow managed to bust out a smile. “C-Catria... Well done...”

She wasn’t even adding “shovel” to the end of her sentences. Seeing the princess in such a state, Alan couldn’t help but rise to take her in his arms.

“You did well too, Lithisia,” he said as he patted her head.

Tears spilled down Lithisia’s cheeks until she began to breathe quietly and fell fast asleep.

The ritual was complete, and the only ones left conscious were Alan and the knights.

“Shovel, Catria, shovel, Catria, shovel.”

They chanted this over and over again.

“Sir...Alan...” Captain Lancelot, the only knight who still retained some semblance of his consciousness, tried to ask Alan for clarification. But even as he did, he held his head, trying his very best to maintain his sense of self. The Shovel Ritual had nearly dug out the entirety of his brain. “Wh-what exactly did we just bear witness to...?”

“Is it not obvious?” Alan responded with full confidence. “You watched the

greatest knight in all the land, Catria, perform the finest act of shoveling this country has ever known.”

Lancelot’s consciousness snapped and he fell to the ground. By the time he next woke, he would be but another dutiful shovel alongside the rest.

This was how Catria formally became the captain of the Holy Shovel Knights.

Part 51:

The Lady Knight Sees through the Fake Princess

THE NEXT DAY, a parade of villagers welcomed Catria at Emelhan, a small village in Rostir.

“Hero Catria, this way!”

“O-okay.”

A troupe of villagers led Catria to the town hall. As a reward for their hard work, the knights were visiting the local villages. In the town hall, Catria was introduced as the guest of honor at a banquet celebrating the dragon slayer hero herself. A nearby banner read: “All Hail Catria the Hero!”

A band merrily played songs praising her amazing feats.

“My word, a brand-new Rostirian hero!” said the smiling man who looked to be the head of the village. “Young, beautiful, and a daughter of House Eugenohl. A genuine hero story!”

The young girls of the village kept glancing at her or staring in open awe; they looked up to Catria.

As for herself, Catria took a seat on a chair in the center of the hall and thought to herself, *It’s been a while since I’ve been on my own...*

She let loose a long sigh.

“Dragon Slayer Catria, what a lovely smile!” said one of the village girls.

Just as the young lady said, at present Catria probably wore the happiest smile of her life. It was the kind of smile she had never once worn on her quest. She was at the height of relaxation.

As for why?

I mean, I mean, I mean—there are no shovels anywhere in sight!

The tears fell from her eyes in a river.

Currently, the princess and Alan were elsewhere.

Currently, the princess and Alan were elsewhere.

This was so important to Catria that it needed to be said twice.

An anti-shovel vacation!

A strange, brand-new concept, to say the least.

Lithisia was in the middle of some kind of fieldshovelspection (probably shovel propagation under the guise of a field inspection). Alan, on the other hand, had infiltrated Zeleburg's forces to gather data on the enemy. For now, the no-longer corrupted Lancelot and his knights served as Lithisia's bodyguards.

In other words, the only people present in the village were humans. A *human* banquet!

Brimming with such joy, Catria couldn't help but sob.

"Oh my gosh! L-Lady Catria, is something the matter?!" the village head cried.

"I-I'm just so grateful for this banquet you're holding for me!"

"O-oh, my word! If anything, we're so sorry we could only throw such a small-scale celebration!"

True, this event was nothing compared to the parties held at the castle, but none of that mattered. The only thing that did matter was the stunning lack of shovels. Even the village's name, Emelhan, left no room for the word "shovel" inside of it. It was perfect (from an anti-shovel perspective.) Of course, the village head had no way of knowing this was what had so pleased Catria, so he got the wrong idea and was moved to tears himself.

"My word! Pl-please enjoy this brief day of rest, then!"

"That's the plan!" Catria declared. *Spring has finally arrived!*

But in the next moment, spring stopped on the doorstep.

"What wonderful news! I've just received word that Princess Lithisia has come to grace us with her presence!"

Shiiiiing.

Catria's warm smile froze over.

“She’s wrapped up her frontline inspection early to join us in our celebration!”

Splash!

The tears didn’t stop falling, but now, they were tears of despair. Catria had given up.

Heh... He he he he... So that’s how it’s going to be, huh? On my one day off... It really did go by in the blink of an eye... So we’re gonna do this shovel thing all over again, huh? Back to war against the shovels, huh? Don’t give up, Catria. She wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled. *I’ve enjoyed my time with humanity. Yeah, my humanity energy bar is nice and charged now. Now it’s time to fight for mankind!*

“Princess Lithisia has arrived!”

A knight’s voice echoed throughout the party venue, which went quiet. Suddenly, a red carpet stretched out from the main door, which slowly opened. Beyond it shone a familiar sight: long golden hair. Before Catria and the villagers stood the image of a perfect princess, one who was once perfect on the inside as well. Now she was just a Shovel Princess.

Your Highness, I won’t lose! I’m not actually sure what I’m fighting against anymore, but I know I have to give it my all!

As Catria steeled her resolve, the golden-haired princess curtsied with two empty hands and introduced herself to the gathered. “Greetings, I am Lithisia. I’m so very grateful that the people of Emelhan are safe and sound.”

She raised her head and bequeathed upon them a perfect smile.

“Ngh!”

Gulp! Catria was so stunned that she swallowed audibly.

Although the villagers were to a one moved by Lithisia’s words, Catria could only call herself shocked.

It wasn’t Lithisia’s words or actions that had the knight frozen in place. Lithisia had once been a perfect princess. Even now, when the situation demanded it (particularly for Shovel Mind Control), she could play the role of a human (how

rude).

No, what shocked Catria was the fact that both of Lithisia's hands were empty.

Unbelievable.

A fierce sense of wrongness took hold within the knight.

"Catria, are you enjoying yourself?" asked Lithisia.

The princess's words didn't reach Catria's ears.

Impossible. Unbelievable. Improbable...!

There was simply no way the princess would be caught dead without the red shovel Alan had given her. That red shovel in Lithisia's hand was an immutable truth of the world. How impossible was this vision? As impossible as a Wave Motion Shovel Blast being fired from a shovel. No, wait. That was actually fairly commonplace.

However, as far as Catria was concerned, this empty-handed Lithisia was something that *should* be impossible, so it got a pass.

Wait! That's right!

Epiphany struck as Catria thought back to the beginning of her own journey. Princess Lithisia had been declared a fake princess and a bounty of one million gold coins had been placed on her head. The true fake princess currently resided in the capital. In other words, this princess here in the village was— *A demon masquerading as the princess!*

Just as Catria came to this conclusion, the villagers raised their voices.

"Oooh, so that's the famous Princess Lithisia! She's so beautiful!"

This seeming-Lithisia went around shaking the hands of each person, wearing that perfect smile all the while.

"We are so grateful for your presence! Princess Lithisia, please bring peace to our humble nation!"

"Oh, but of course! I have the expert swordsmanship of my skilled knights to rely upon, after all."

A true fake. This Lithisia relied not on the shovel, but on the sword.

“Oooh, how beautiful! Princess Lithisia is the treasure of all of humanity!”

“Thank you so much. But I’m not the treasure of this great country. Rather, I believe that honor goes to you, its citizens.”

Aha. The last word of her sentence had an “s” in it, yet it wasn’t shovelfied. Catria was 120 percent certain she was fake.

“The most beautiful princess in all the land and the greatest dragon-slaying knight in all the land! We could write a hundred songs of this moment alone!”

“Hee hee hee, Catria is most certainly the greatest hero in all the land, but I do not deserve such an honor.”

This not-Lithisia didn’t even mention Alan. She was absolutely a fraud.

And yet Catria thought to herself, *I mean, is the fake so bad? Can’t we just let her do her thing?*

“ ... ”

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the princess cast her gaze upon Catria.

“Catria, will you continue to lend me your strength?” the un-Lithisia extended a hand toward her. In other words, she requested a kiss of fealty from her knight in front of all of these watchful eyes.

The villagers beheld what they thought would be a historic moment, the moment in which the dragon-slaying hero swore undying loyalty to her beloved princess. Even Catria herself swayed under the desire to kiss that immaculate hand.

Before Catria stood a princess uncorrupted by shovels—even if she wasn’t exactly human (she was, in fact, a demon). Nonetheless, nonetheless! This princess wouldn’t ever order Catria to be the captain of the Holy Shovel Knights, or demand she engage in any kind of unseemly rituals to claim her place.

The knight didn’t know what to do, and tears once more began to flow. She grit her teeth. This was the most important decision of her entire life.

If she kissed the fake princess’s hand, she would be saying goodbye to the

Shovel Princess forever. She'd be able to live out her days in peace.

Yet amidst her inner turmoil, she heard his voice.

"Catria, I want to mine everything you have."

"Nnnngh!"

SWOOSH!

Just as Catria remembered the words Alan said to her in Hell, her body unconsciously drew her sword from the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia.

"What?! Lady Catria?!"

Panicked voices rose around her as she began to cry. It caused Catria great pain to cast aside the hope she had only just discovered for herself.

He...he mined my talent.

Catria would never bend to the shovel. She would never bend to Alan. And she would certainly never bend to the princess. But even then...

The princess (prior to corruption) had once expected great things from her, and Alan had mined and uncovered her latent talent. If she kissed this not-princess's knuckle, she would betray both of them—and even if she did so to protect the world from shovels, that was the one thing Catria could never do.

After all, she had decided to become the greatest knight in all the land.

"Have you gone mad, Lady Catria?!"

The villagers panicked, but despite their terror, the princess remained calm. Unnaturally so. Although Catria's sword pointed directly at her, she continued to smile brightly.

"Heh..."

The change was slight at first. Then a dark smile formed on the princess's face. Her once-golden locks blackened at the tips, then darkness crept in waves up through her tresses.

"Heh, I'm surprised you noticed. I suppose I should've expected as much from the human who somehow managed to slay a dragon. You pass!" The princess's very pronunciation was alluring.

“Haaah, haaah, haaah...” Catria became short of breath, and tears pricked her eyes, a sheen of sweat creeping over her body.

“Oh, my. You’re actually crying. Hee hee, do you hate me that much?”

Catria was indeed crying, and she was indeed full of hatred. Hatred toward this princess. “I’ll...I’ll never forgive you!”

“Well, gosh. Then I suppose I must apologize for impersonating your precious princess and—”

“That’s not it!”

“Huh?”

Catria kept the point of her sword trained on the princess as she shouted. That’s right. The cause of all of this was in fact—“You all! You’re the ones...”

None of this would have happened if Zeleburg hadn’t taken over Rostir.

“It’s all your fault that Lithisia...no, this entire nation was corrupted by the shovel!!!” Catria shouted out from the very depths of her soul.

“Excuse me?” the fake Lithisia asked.

Her pupils resembled nothing more than black dots—not shovels. This only further confirmed she was no true princess.

Part 52:

The Miner Fills the Empty Hole in the Demon Generals' Roster

“ANSWER ME, fake princess! Just who exactly are you?!”

Catria pointed her sword at the woman standing in the midst of the agitated crowd.

The princess laughed sweetly and elegantly raised the hem of her princess dress in a curtsy. “I’m the leader of my elder brother Zeleburg’s Eight Demon Generals, Elise of the Reflection. And—” A smile flashed across her face. “I’m also your mistress, Princess Lithisia.”

Elise giggled happily, utterly like the real Lithisia once had.

“I mean, I am, to be sure, the Demon of Reflection who serves Zeleburg. But with just one strand of someone’s hair, I can perfectly copy their personality, even

their memories. In that sense, I am in truth also the real Princess Lithisia. Do you understand what this means, Knight Catria?” She winked and smiled again, the very same innocent smile that Lithisia used to share with Catria.

Used to.

“No, you’re wrong!!!” Catria shed tears of blood. *That’s right...! Lithisia used to be just like this!* “But during our journey... Ah...ah, my princess! What happened to you?!”

“Ah, I understand now. In the months since I first began this masquerade, she’s changed, hasn’t she?”

“Changed? You call that *change*?! It’s more like evolution! No, Shovelution!”

“Pardon?” The fake had no idea what Catria was talking about. She blinked innocently, an action completely uncorrupted by the shovel.

In her heart, Catria desperately wanted to trade in the real Lithisia for this one.

“Knight Catria, you appear to be rather confused.”

“Yes, you’re right. I can say with certainty that on this journey of mine, no one in all of humanity has been as confused as myself.” It was the only way she had managed to stay uncorrupted.

“Hrm. In other words, you hate Zeleburg for taking over the country so much that it’s thrown you into confusion? Ah ha ha!”

“No, not at all, actually.”

“Hee hee, still trying to act tough, I see.”

No, Catria was being completely earnest. But Elise didn’t seem to understand (how sad).

“Then how about I confuse you even further, Knight Catria?” Elise asked.

“What...?”

“Have you ever asked yourself why a lord of Hell like the great demon Zeleburg would go out of his way to conquer a tiny kingdom like Rostir? Let me educate you. Once you understand the true extent of his ambition, you will fall into indescribable despair, and undoubtedly you will beg me to let you serve us.” It appeared Elise had grown fond of Catria, probably because the lady knight had seen through her façade. “Listen well!”

And so Elise explained a tale of the heavenly and demonic realms. Long ago, the two had forged the “Astral Pact,” in which they swore to never invade the surface world. This pact, however, would soon reach the end of its agreed upon time limit. To prepare for the inevitable upcoming war between realms, Hell’s greatest demon lord delegated Zeleburg to be her representative and tasked him with preemptively taking control of the nations on the surface.

“Hell’s greatest demon lord?”

“Precisely. My elder brother is none other than—” Elise leered proudly. “Lord Asmodeus’s representative!”

Silence.

“Asmodeus, huh?”

Another five seconds of silence passed.

Elise frowned unhappily. “What’s up with you? Don’t you even know who Lord Asmodeus is? How could you be so ignorant?”

“No, that’s not it. I just...” Catria winced. Well, she had just met Asmodeus down in Hell not a few days ago. Asmodeus had even given Catria a present.

But Catria couldn’t say that out loud, as she felt way too bad about it, considering how proud Elise seemed to be of her master. Frankly, she wasn’t entirely unlike how Catria had been about Lithisia when she first met Alan.

“Hee hee hee, and that’s not all! This is a secret, but Zeleburg’s aim isn’t just to carry out Asmodeus’s design! My elder brother plans to use the coming ‘Holy War’ to dethrone Lord Asmodeus using his trump card!”

“Trump card?”

“Correct. That’s why he targeted Rostir!” Elise smiled proudly again. “We discovered that beneath Rostir sleeps an ancient demon from the heavenly era.”

“Really?”

“Yes! Certainly you know this demon’s name. I know it appears in your holy scriptures.” Elise spread her hands and proudly declared, “The King of Hell, Demogorgon!”

Silence. Another five seconds passed.

Catria had indeed seen this name in holy scriptures—the Great Demon Demogorgon from the heavenly era. But she had also heard its name more recently. In fact, it had been said back when she first started traveling with Alan.

When was it again? Ah, didn’t he mention it when he was explaining the Wave Motion Shovel Blast? Catria frowned. “Erm... the Alter Genesis of Amber, I think?”

“WHAAA?!” Elise’s jaw nearly hit the floor. “H-h-how do you know about Alter Genesis?!”

You mean he was telling the truth?

Back during the assault on Alice's castle, Alan had explained how he had sealed away the Demogorgon. At the time, Catria had screamed it was a lie, but now she had no choice but to believe him.

As Catria came to terms with her own memories, Elise cast an ominous gaze at the knight.

"Knight Catria... I like you quite a bit. Yes, yes, I do!" Her eyes sparkled, not unlike those of the real princess, and her smile shone with fighting spirit. "How could you know Hell's greatest secret? I'm going to make you swear fealty to me no matter what!"

"Make me? How?"

"By taking the last of Lithisia's memories and becoming the one true princess!"

"What—no, you can't!" Catria flew into full-throttle panic. This was the one thing Elise absolutely could not do.

"Oh, what's this? So your memories with the princess are in fact important to you. Hee hee."

"No, that's not it! It's too dangerous! You can't do this! You're playing with fire!"

"Yes, yes! That's exactly the expression I wanted to see on your face! Let me drink up your loyalty toward your mistress!"

But Catria wasn't concerned for Lithisia's safety. No, she was in fact worried about Elise—especially as, if Elise were successful, it wasn't like the old Lithisia would disappear. There'd just be two Shovel Princesses at once.

The Holy War? Ha! The world would end well before that if Elise succeeded!

"Please, I'm begging you! I want you to stay who you are!" Catria pleaded.

The old princess was right here, right in front of her. No matter what happened, Catria didn't want her to get corrupted.

"Mm, wh-what's with that concerned look?" Elise was displeased. She thought she might even detect affection in Catria's gaze.

On the outside, Elise looked just like Lithisia, absolutely beautiful. And with that thought, Catria began to plot. She had to tear Elise away from Zeleburg at all costs. Perhaps she might actually be able to replace the original princess.

“You’re quite odd, but your strength is true. Fine.” Elise cleared her throat. “Dragon Slayer Catria, a hero such as yourself is worthy of joining the ranks of the Eight Demon Generals. Thanks to a battle against Beelzebub, we happen to have two spots open. We just filled one earlier, but I’ll make sure to leave the other open just for you!”

“Anything but filling, please.” An immediate answer, primarily because filling was related to shovels.

“Hee hee hee, I’m looking forward to the future... Ah, right!” Elise snapped her fingers and a crack in space suddenly appeared. “I’m quite busy, so I’ll leave you with a gift.”

“A gift?”

“I’ll leave the rest to the seventh member of the Eight Demon Generals. Don’t worry, Catria. I know you’ll put up a good fight.” Elise faded into the mist, a princess-worthy smile on her face. “Take care not to die... Not until the day I become your true Princess Lithisia.”

And so Elise disappeared, leaving only Catria and a rift in space behind.

“I have to stop her!” Under no circumstances could Catria let Elise become like the real Princess Lithisia.

With that in mind, Catria pointed her sword at the crack in space. One of the Eight Demon Generals would soon arrive, but she’d be okay.

I defeated a dragon! As long as it’s not a shovel, I can take down any monster that comes my way.

Just as she thought that, a familiar sword-tipped shovel appeared through the crack.

“Pardon?”

Followed by a familiar man. In other words, it was just Alan.

“ ... ”

“Mm, shwarp successful.” Alan smacked his shovel against the crack and filled in the space. (How?!) He then turned to face the dragon slayer. “Catria, sorry for bothering you in the middle of your banquet, but I’ve come with intel.”

A few seconds of silence passed.

“Um, Elise told me I was about to face the seventh member of the Eight Demon Generals,” said Catria.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Don’t ‘that’s me’ me!”

“Trust me, I haven’t betrayed you or anything,” Alan continued. “There just happened to be an open post, so I filled it with my shovel.”

“Stop doing that.”

“At the end of the day, the best way to gather enemy intelligence is always gonna be to infiltrate their ranks. Now I know Zeleburg’s objective and overall combat strength.”

“I said: Stop doing that.”

“His goal is to revive the Demogorgon I once sealed away and—what’s wrong, Catria?”

Everything and nothing.

Catria looked up at the heavens. She recalled Elise’s pure smile, and, for some reason, tears once more began to stream down her cheeks.

Please, please let her stay uncorrupted, Catria pleaded.

This was probably impossible.

Part 53:

The Miner Bends His Wave Motion Shovel Blast

ALAN, CATRIA, LITHISIA, and the order of knights they had brought with them set up camp in a great grassy field.

“Now, everyone! It is time for us to begin this shovolutionary war and take back our country, shovel!” Lithisia proudly declared in front of the high-ranking knights.

Really? “Shovolutionary”? But none of the knights seemed bothered by her weird wording.

Lithisia gripped her red shovel and began to merrily sing. “Shovolution! Shovolution, shovolution! Hee hee!”

Lancelot simply watched in silence and nodded. *Yeah, nothing I say here is going to make a difference.*

“Alan, the princess’s illness is getting worse.” Catria shed tears for Elise as she thought of the uncorrupted doppelgänger. She could not afford to let these two princesses meet, no matter what. “She barely uses words that aren’t shovel-related.”

“That seems to be the case,” Alan said.

“Then stop her! You’re the only one who can!”

“I refuse.”

“But why?!”

“This is Lithisia’s war. I’ve decided to let her do as she wishes.”

The worst chill of Catria’s entire life ran down her spine.

If Alan had no intention of stopping Lithisia, things were bound to turn extremely bad. The shovelfication of the world was about to begin.

“And now, Princess Lithisia, allow us to explain the mission plan we’ve devised.”

While Catria combated existential dread, Lancelot began to break down the

operation.

Using a map of Rostir, he plotted out their path from the camp to the capital, a journey that would take approximately three days. They would make directly for the city, storm the gates, and take Zeleburg's head.

A straight shot to the capital. No tricks, no complex strategies. Just a good old-fashioned siege. This would, of course, draw the attention of their enemies, but the knights were prepared.

"I see... You want to dig through the front line. Not a bad plan, Lancelot, shovel." Lithisia happily nodded.

Catria let out a sigh of relief, but too soon.

"But if I were to grade your plan, I'd only be able to give you a shore (score + shovel) of 60," said Lithisia.

"You mean 60 points?"

"I mean a shore of 60. A route worthy of a shore of 100 looks like this."

Ignoring Lancelot's attempt to interrupt, Lithisia began to embellish upon his simple siege plan. At the starting point, she drew a rectangle, and at the objective, near the capital, she drew a sharp triangle. Once she had made these additions, she wiped the sweat from her brow.

A rectangle, one long line, and a triangle. It was obvious to one and all what they were looking at, especially since Alan currently had in his possession something that looked exactly like it.

"A shovel?!" Catria shouted, unable to hold back.

The rectangle was its handle, the single line was its body, the triangle was its metal head.

"This is the standard route for the Holy Shovel Knights, shovel!" Lithisia declared.

"But, Your Highness, this path would have us walk in something of a circle after beginning our march." In other words, it was a route that might as well scream, "Please attack us!"

“And as Shovel Knights, it is your job to win regardless, Catria.”

Lithisia was asking the impossible, as usual, and Catria could do naught but hold her head. The princess wouldn't listen to a word she had to say. Was that really okay? As the captain responsible for the lives of her men, was it really okay for her to accept such an absurd plan? As Catria descended into anxious vapors, Alan spoke up.

“Catria, don't worry about the route. This is the perfect chance for you.”

“What do you mean...?”

Alan gripped his shovel and nodded down at the map of Rostir. “Haven't I always told you that the shovel is at its most powerful on the battlefield?”

“Urgh.” Catria recalled with grim clarity their battle against Alice's undead army. It hadn't even been a battle, really. More like a one-sided massacre that had made her feel silly for thinking herself a knight. *Are we seriously doing this again? Really?*

“Catria, it's about time you teach your men how to go to war with shovel in hand,” said Alan.

“N-no, please! I don't know anything about that!”

“Don't worry. I know you can do it,” said Lithisia.

“Don't look at me with sparkling eyes! I might be able to do it, but I don't want to!”

Catria resisted with futile tears as Lithisia and the knights watched on with warm smiles.

The knights in the tent focused their attention on Alan. In the end, it had been decided that he'd show them what to do. Catria's role, meanwhile, would be to explain his techniques. The lady knight insisted that this was a job more suited to Lithisia, but Alan refused.

“Do you really think she'd give an explanation that a human could understand?” he asked.

His words rang so true that Catria found herself without a response.

“N-now then, everyone. Please watch Alan very c-carefully. Ahem.” Catria cleared her throat and passed the proverbial baton to the miner.

“Thank you. On any battlefield, the most important thing is information.”

The knights nodded deeply. They were well aware of this fact.

“Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles.”

“However, the battlefield is currently covered in the fog of war, meaning we will always be working with an incomplete understanding of the situation.”

“That is indeed true,” one of the knights agreed.

“That’s where the shovel comes in.” Alan took his shovel from his back, then placed a large piece of wood on the table in front of him.

“Er...” said one knight.

“Yeah, that sure is a piece of wood from a tree,” said another.

“It’s even got leaves on it,” said a third.

“This is a chunk of wood from a fog tree that I cut down over there,” Alan explained, nodding over his shoulder. “The fog bit is very important, because that links it to the battlefield, where we want to create our change. Now on to the next part—what sort of emotion is often found on a battlefield? Passion.”

“Huh?”

“People are passionate on the battlefield because they fight for a cause.” Alan began to carefully carve the wood. Within a few seconds, the piece of wood had taken on the shape of a doll. More specifically, it was a doll of a naked girl whose clothes had been ripped away by tentacles. She was trying to cover herself up.

Actually, it was just Catria.

“What the?”

Every last anatomical detail was spot-on.

“Ooooooooooh!” The knights raised their voices in excitement.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEK! What are you doing?! Alan, st-stop looking?!”

Once Catria realized the situation, she tried to cover up the wooden doll, but it was too big.

“My apologies. When I thought of the word passion, you were the first person who came to mind.”

Catria’s cheeks burned. *That’s what you thought when the tentacles tore at my clothes?! You big dumb jerk! Don’t just say things like that in front of other people!*

“Hrm, I can feel the passion from this.”

“Indeed, we have a truly passionate captain.”

The entire group of knights folded their arms as they nodded their heads in stern agreement.

All Catria could do was stare at her hands. She would forevermore live in disgrace.

“I’m not sure I understand the reason behind carving the fog tree wood into a passionate doll.”

The knights pressed Alan for an explanation, but he just nodded and gripped his shovel.

“Thanks to the work we’ve done, the fog tree doll is now linked to the battlefield through the concept of passion. Now we shovel it up.”

Alan proceeded to shovel up Doll Catria’s fog-wood chest. Catria flinched, but Alan paid no mind to her, instead focusing on the book he uncovered in that wooden torso.

“Here we have it: Zeleburg’s military placement and mission structure. The complete collection,” Alan announced. “By digging up this passionately posed fog tree doll, one can acquire all kinds of information. In essence, it allows us to dig through the fog of war.”

“Ooooooooooooh!”

The knights were vocally impressed, but Catria crouched down and sobbed. She had been shoveled. Her heart had been shoveled, even if it wasn't technically hers.

While Catria continued to let her tears fall, she noticed Lithisia fidgeting. She was looking dolefully between her own ample chest and the wooden doll's noticeably more modest one.

"Sir Miner, don't you think they're a little...shovel?" she asked.

"Say what now?" said Alan.

"Huh? Er, um, it's nothing, shovel!" That clearly wasn't the case, but Lithisia nonetheless smiled.

Alan nodded. "I'll make one of you later, so cheer up."

"Huh? But I, um, um!" Lithisia pressed her index fingers together, incapable of turning down his offer. "Shovel. (I'm so happy.)"

And thus did Alan open the map detailing the location of Zeleburg's forces. His army had been separated into six units. The closest unit belonged to Zalbag, one of the Eight Demon Generals. This complete collection of intelligence really was something else.

"His unit's a mix of dragons and giants?!" Lancelot gasped.

Specifically, a squad of ten Hell Wyrms and a brigade of stone-throwing giants. First, they would engage the enemy in a joint attack, then a phalanx of ogres would storm the front while teams of lesser demons launched attacks from both sides.

All in all, at best, the "human" forces were outnumbered something like a hundred to one. Zeleburg's army wasn't just large enough to take over Rostir, it was grand enough to annihilate the entire continent.

"Alan, I'm sure you could beat them all by yourself."

"That'd be pointless. The invaders must be defeated by the hands of the Rostirians themselves."

So you're saying you could defeat them all, Catria thought to herself, already having given up.

Alan grasped his shovel. “Listen well, knights. After shoveling the fog of war, the next step is to break down our enemy’s plan.”

“You mean get one step ahead of them?”

“No. The thing about a well-crafted plan is that even if all the details get leaked, you can’t necessarily get ahead of it.”

“I see. Then what would you have us do?”

“We dig a hole in their plan. Specifically, we dig a ‘grave.’”

“Can’t you just do this yourself, please?” Catria moaned.

She could just picture what was coming next. A hole would be dug in their enemy’s battle plans, and a totally bizarre thing would occur—like their main forces abruptly having to go on a day-long trip back home to Hell.

I know how this goes now. Nothing surprises me anymore, Catria thought to herself. She’d already given up. Again.

Alan thrust his shovel forward and a flash of light filled the tent.

CLAAAAAAAAANG!

His shovel reflected right off the mission plan.

“Hrm,” said Alan.

“Wha?!” said Catria.

“Shoooooooooovel?! ” said you-know-who.

All three of them were genuinely surprised.

This bewildering moment was followed up by a strange mechanical voice rising from the mission plan itself. “Alert. Unauthorized access detected. Requesting Lord Zeleburg’s genetic identification.”

“Alan, what is this?!”

“Hmph, a protection program. So he’s already figured out how to deal with me...”

“Figured out how to deal with you, Sir Miner, scoop?!” In all of her shock, Lithisia used “scoop” to end her sentence.

Catria was in a similar place, her mouth opening and shutting in stunned surprise.

Zeleburg had managed to defend against the shovel's conceptual interference? How could Alan's invincible shovel be countered? *Wait, wait, what am I saying? It almost sounds like I believe in his shovel!*

While Catria tried to make excuses for herself, a woman's voice rang out from behind them—a voice with which Catria was all too familiar.

"I never thought I'd see the day when that protection program activated."

"I-It's you!"

Catria turned to find the princess standing there, only she was translucent, her lower body buried in empty space, and she wasn't holding a shovel. In other words, it was Elise, the fake princess.

"Elise, did you do this?!"

The fake princess shot Catria a serious gaze. "That's my line, Catria. Who exactly are you? How could a non-deity, a mortal no less, use conceptual interference? What Pantheon did you sell your soul to? Or is this perhaps the work of some artifact I've never heard of?"

Elise glared at Catria. As a higher demon, the intensity of her gaze was enough to make Catria wince.

"Catria didn't do it, shovel! It was Sir Miner, shovel."

Shump, shump, thud. This was the sound of a shovel destroying the atmosphere.

"Excuse me?" Elise turned to find Lithisia standing behind her, shimmering pupils shaped like shovels. The condition was already terminal for her. "Oh, my. So you're the real deal... Hold on, wait. What's with the 'shovel' thing you keep saying?"

"Shovel means shovel when you apply shovel to shovel!"

Elise went silent for a few seconds. "Catria, what is this thing?"

"The real princess." Or perhaps she was better described as the person Catria

wished was not the real princess.

“Enough with the jokes. She looks extremely similar, but there’s no way the real princess would walk around holding a shovel.”

Catria desperately wanted to agree, but at the end of the day, that Lithisia was the real deal.

“Having a shovel is a part of a princess’s duty, shovel. You’re the one who’s shoveling fake, shovel!”

“Er, you’re right, I am. But I’d rather you of all people not tell me that.”

“Shovel!” Lithisia snarled.

“Huh?! What was that unearthly noise?!”

The fake Lithisia and the shovel Lithisia were having a battle of words.

Honestly, I wish they’d both just vanish from the continent, Catria thought to herself.

Just then, Alan stepped forward. “You called it a protection program. Was this Asmodeus’s doing?”

Elise stopped in her tracks to face him. “And who are you? Are you one of Catria’s soldiers? No, you must be a construction worker, considering the shovel.”

“I’m just a miner. Alan the miner.”

“Hmmm. You seem rather wise for someone who claims to be ‘just a miner.’ But you’re correct, this is Lord Asmodeus’s power. It neutralizes any tampering with the laws of the world—other than Lord Zeleburg’s, of course. It was Asmodeus’s trump card against the Pantheons, but I’m stunned a human could use it.” Elise laughed happily. “Not bad at all, Catria. I want you even more now.”

“Um, it really wasn’t me.” Catria had determined that she needed to tell Elise the truth. It hurt her heart to keep getting misunderstood like this. “I’m just a knight. Alan did it.”

“Hah?” Elise looked lost.

“Wrong, shovel! You’re not just a knight, you’re the captain of the Holy Shovel Knights, shovel!”

“We’re not going to get anywhere at this rate, so could you please be quiet, Your Highness?”

Lithisia made a triangular face of apology. Even when she went quiet, she found a way to be shovel.

“Catria, I hate boring jokes. Answer me truthfully.” Elise’s eyes glowed a terrifying crimson, the color of magic accumulation. “Are you telling me that this regular old miner performed conceptual interference with a *shovel*?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Catria sighed.

“You’re telling me that he interfered with the Laws of the World using a *shovel*?”

“That’s...correct,” Catria answered as she put her hand on her forehead and began to shed tears of despair. *That’s right. It’s all right! This is all the work of that man’s shovel!*

There was a long pause. “I asked you to answer me honestly... I’m disappointed in you.”

Elise’s astral body rose up into the air. Behind her opened a crack in space that resembled a black hole—a vortex of magical energy, a winding, bending space. The laws of physics contorted in the area.

Catria showed no surprise at any of this. She was all too familiar with this kind of phenomenon. The power to unearth the world itself, to interact with the laws of reality, she felt a similar power coming from the hole behind Elise. She could feel it, but...

The shovel is even more amazing... she thought.

“Pay for your sins and die. Destruction Ray!”

GI-ZOOOOOOOOOM!

Catria couldn’t be shocked by the dark black beam of energy headed her way, nor could she be particularly afraid of it. She was used to this sort of thing. Catria had seen exactly this kind of beam before.

At last, Alan took action. “Catria, step back.”

It all happened so quickly. He raised his shovel above his head, unlocked the safety (where this so-called “safety” was, nobody knew), and unleashed his blue Shovel Barrier. It was almost as if time itself froze in the instant that Alan unleashed this ability, and it was after he finished that he fired *it*.

“DIG!”

KA-CHOOOOOOOOOM!

Alan’s Wave Motion Shovel Blast.

A blue and white beam ripped through the space between Heaven and Earth, an invincible power capable of digging through anything. The width of Alan’s beam exceeded Elise’s Destruction Ray by an order of approximately one hundred, and it zoomed by Catria’s eyes before engulfing the fake princess’s attack.

Just before it hit Elise, it smoothly bent and instead struck the hole in space.

When it was over, all that remained was Elise and her torn clothes—singled, a bit, thanks to her proximity to the beam.

Silence took the tent.

What the hell? (What the hell?) Elise’s bewildered thoughts fused into but a single word. “SHOVEL!!!”



Meanwhile, Princess Lithisia celebrated. “Sir Miner, Sir Miner! Your Wave Motion Shovel Blast bent like zzoom!”

“It did. I knew she would make a fine prisoner and an excellent source of information. I had to take her alive.”

“But of course! Leave the shoveling to me, shovel! After training with Alice for so long, my shovel is something else!” Lithisia delightedly explained.

Catria sighed deeply as she gazed upon Elise, who stared at Lithisia and Alan with a completely frozen expression.

Man, I thought she'd last a little longer.

The trouble was, Catria's shovel-sensing abilities had long since reached spiritual enlightenment, and this made it a bit difficult for her to assess the unafflicted.

Part 54:

The Miner Zeleburgs Beelzebub

ELISE LAY ON THE FLOOR, trussed up à la shovel (you know, that thing poor Alice was often subjected to.) After her defeat, she had attempted to flee through astral space but quickly tumbled back into the real world because Alan had preemptively dug an extradimensional trap hole.

“Wait a minute! How can you possibly dig a hole in metaphysical dimensions?!”

Gosh, I really do like this woman, Catria thought, relieved to hear the fake princess’s entirely logical complaint. She sipped her tea peacefully. *It truly is wonderful having someone else around to play the straight woman.*

“Now then, it’s about time we put an end to their plans.” Alan regripped his shovel while he went back to scanning through the complete collection of Zeleburg’s plans.

Elise managed to shake off her confusion and laughed. “I’m telling you, it’s impossible! The mission plan is protected by a lock that can only be opened with Lord Zeleburg’s blood.”

“No problem. I can whip up as much of that as we need.”

“Huh?” Blink, blink, blinky (the sound of a confused Elise blinking.) “You can... create it?”

“Yeah. I only need to use the demon Lord of Flies, Beelzebub.”

“What? Wait. Hold all the horses. Seriously, just hold everything!” Sweat beaded Elise’s forehead. *What’s with this guy? I don’t understand a thing he says.*

However, Elise did understand that this strange man had managed to both interfere with her astral teleportation and neutralize her Destruction Ray. She was in no position to dismiss his existence or chalk his babble up to nonsense.

“Alan... I don’t understand,” said Catria. “How does using Beelzebub help us? Explain.”

“Oh, oh! I wanna know too, Sir Miner, shovel!” Lithisia said, smiling and hopping up and down.

Alan nodded. “It’s simple. Zeleburg and Beelzebub share the sounds ‘ze,’ ‘l,’ and ‘b.’”

Ten excruciatingly long seconds passed. Then thirty. Catria could no longer hold in her thoughts. Elise’s confusion accelerated to Mach speeds. Lithisia simply stared at Alan. As if by some unseen signal, the three of them cried out at the exact same time: “So what?!”

“So what?!”

“Scopmazing calcushovelings! (Amazing, Sir Miner! Your calculations are perfect!)”

One person failed to fall in synch with the others, but it’s okay to put that aside.

“How are you even planning to get Beelzebub’s blood or whatever?!” Catria wailed.

The demon lord Beelzebub, though a subordinate to Asmodeus, was undoubtedly still a lord of Hell.

“Well, obviously, by going to Hell and defeating him.”

Alan tapped his shovel against the ground, Shovelporting instantly. He then commenced a direct assault on Beelzebub’s castle, located in the alternate dimension of Goriol, said demon lord’s territory. With his shovel, Alan broke down the anti-instant teleportation defense walls and wiped the floor with Beelzebub’s ghouls. At the end of a long and hard-fought battle, Alan fired his Wave Motion Shovel Blast at point-blank range into Beelzebub’s massive body, skewering the demon, who let out a cry of pain and vanished. (He had fled into yet another dimension.) At the floor before Alan’s feet, blue blood pooled. Alan scooped it up with his shovel.

Approximately one minute after this process had originally started, Alan returned.

“I’m back. I have some of Beelzebub’s blood.”

“Wow, you were so fast, shovel!”

“What the hell? (What the hell?)”

Elise was a ball of confusion, so Alan showed her a small bottle filled with the blue blood. The label read: “Beelzebub’s blood.”

“Here, you see? Now first, I use my shovel to extract the unnecessary two ‘b’ sounds from the end of his name. I then pickle the ‘b’ sounds in the blood in order to extract the ‘b’ element from them.” Shoof, shoof, shoof. “Hrm, looks good. Drink this, Catria.”

“I refuse with every fiber of my being.”

“I’ll drink it,” said Lithisia. Shovechug! (Shovechug!)

The label on the bottle suddenly changed. Now it said: “Beelz’s blood.” The pickled ‘b’ sounds were, according to Lithisia, delicious.

“Next we mix in the blood of the ghouls I defeated in Goriol. What sort of sound does a ghoul make?”

“Oh, oh! I know! ‘Urg’!”

The label suddenly changed again. Now it said: “Beelzurg’s blood.” The contents had turned ever so slightly green.

“Last but not least, we stir it up with my shovel to fix the order.”

“Almost there, shovel!”

The label changed a final time. Now it said: “Zeleburg’s blood.”

Seriously?

“And voila. Should be nice and rich.”

“It really came out perfectly, shovel!”

With that, Alan poured “Zeleburg’s blood” over his shovel and waved it over the mission manual.

“Conceptual interference detected. Lord Zeleburg’s blood detected. Perfect level of richness. Undoubtedly the real deal,” the manual said.

This identification system sucked.

Alan proceeded to dig a hole in the manual—a hole in the mission plan, so to speak. He changed the plan as such: at the start of the battle, the supreme commander, Zalbag, would immediately charge into the fray alone and be captured, leading to victory for the Holy Shovel Knights in their first battle against the forces of Zeleburg. This would occur two hours hence.

“Um, Catria?! What the hell’s going on?! Seriously! Is this for real?!” Elise cried out, on the verge of a total breakdown.

Ah, she’s a goner, thought Catria. “Don’t ask me. I don’t want to know.”

With the demons’ plan in tatters, Elise stared on in confusion, wracked by chills, throat shaking, and drenched in sweat. Catria knew this feeling.

Wait, this can’t be! It can’t! Elise shot Alan a terrified look. “You... It can’t be... Are you... Are you a God-class entity?!”

“Pardon?” Alan tilted his head. He stuck his shovel into the dirt and held it straight. “Not at all. I’m Alan. Just a regular old miner.”

Many, many seconds passed. Time itself seemed to stop, and no one so much as twitched a muscle.

Then Elise screamed a scream so loud that perhaps the whole world could hear it. “THERE’S NO WAY SOMEONE LIKE YOU IS JUST A MINER!!!”

The fake princess’s pure, agonized bewilderment inspired a deep sense of nostalgia within Catria.

This is so nice...

And thus was how the leader of the Eight Demon Generals, Elise of the Reflection, took her first step to the greatest fall.

Part 55:

The Fake Princess Gets Delevohs

ELISE DREAMT.

In her dream, she returned to the time before she awakened as Elise of the Reflection. Up until then, she had been but a scornful demon aimlessly wandering the human realm.

Trace... Copy... Complete. I'm now Princess Sheila.

Every year, Elise replaced an important figure in the human realm. Her objective was simple: to make light of the humans. That was all.

They're all so stupid!

She seemed to remember having a different objective in the beginning. During the War of Genocide, the greater demons had ordered the Demon of Reflection (at the time she'd had no name) to replace important individuals. But when the war ended, the greater demons vanished, and her sense of being went with them.

Abandoned, the young demon decided to enjoy the world for all it had to offer. Principally, that took the form of laughing at the humans. Scorn and mockery were the only emotions the Demon of Reflection retained.

"Oh, Lady Sheila, I love you and only you..."

While accepting the clueless prince's kiss, the demon laughed within her heart. *Ah ha ha, this idiot thinks I'm the same Sheila from yesterday! What a fool!*

She smiled brightly with the knowledge that everything the prince believed to be true was fake. His true love, his eternal vow, his friendship. All of it, she could easily copy and ape, and that filled her with such joy. All humans were fake, and the meaninglessness of their lives was so pitiful that it made her laugh.

Ah ha ha ha!

Thus did she live, laughing and laughing.

Then something changed. She met a girl—no, an *existence*.

Having grown tired of playing the role of Princess Sheila, she searched for her next target. She had played a king of the human realm, a demon emperor, a princess, and a hero. Next, she sought to become a saint in the backwoods of a certain holy nation, one who was worshipped by the locals as a prophet.

According to the saint's retainers, she claimed to be God's messenger and had a growing list of believers.

The demon took great interest in this falsehood of a girl.

Hee hee, how about I fake the role of a fake God? The demon was certain it'd be a blast.

When she faced the prophet and called the other girl a fake, she was merely making a bit of fun. But in reality, the saint was a genuine fake. She was no prophet. And the moment the demon at last crept up upon the saint and cast her Reflection Eyes upon the girl, she faced a terrible sight.

"Hrm, Demon of Reflection, you still wander the surface?" said the saint.

"?!"

Chills shook every atom of the demon's being.

"Shall I erase you, then?"

A wave of intense confusion washed over the demon.

Error. Incapable of recreating. Data analysis impossible. Initiating conceptual interference protection. Reverse assembler activated. Reflection system infiltrated.

This was bad. Very bad.

System destruction— "NOOOOOOOO!!!"

At the last minute, the demon managed to avert her gaze with her remaining power and just barely escaped the saint.

"Oho, you managed to evade the protection program? Not bad at all." The saint smiled the faintest of smiles.

"Wh-what... Who are you?!"

“Fascinating. It’ll be quite the interesting experiment to keep you alive. Struggle as you must.” The saint giggled happily, her smile familiar to the demon. It was the same sort of smile the demon often wore. A smile of scorn. A smile that looked down upon all before her as base and pitiful. “Good luck, fake who can never become real.”

With those words, the saint vanished.

Left behind, the demon’s mouth hung open as she came to grips with what had happened—and the meaning behind the saint’s final words.

The saint had mocked the demon for being a fake who would never truly know what it felt like to be real.

Me? Laughed at? The being who laughed at all others?

For the first time, a feeling other than the desire to scorn others bubbled up inside her.

“How... How dare you!” the demon screamed tearfully.

The constantly transforming demon had never felt so fierce an emotion. The tears wouldn’t stop rolling down her cheeks, nor would the shakes come to an end. She would never forgive that saint. She’d never forgive that higher being for looking down on her, making fun of her, and laughing at her.

The script had flipped on the demon, and that, well, that was—“Unforgivable! I’ll get you for this, I swear!”

It hurt. But she wouldn’t give in.

A fake who can never become real, she says?

“I’ll show her... I’ll become real. Just you wait and see!”

And so the demon’s objective changed. She would find her way back to being the one who laughed at others. But in order to do that, she had to figure out what exactly the saint was. She researched and researched and researched, using the identity of whoever she could find. The head of the philosopher’s academy, the captain of the Holy Temple Knights, the head historian of a great nation.

Only once she found her way to a meeting with the greater demon Zeleburg

in Hell did she finally understand.

“You came into contact with a God-class entity—a Pantheon Master. One who had descended to the surface, no less.”

“What do you mean?”

“You met a monster capable of controlling the world’s laws. Judging by your description, I’d bet it was the Lord of Souls, Elise.”

A creature like that existed in this world? Upon learning this, “Elise” finally regained her laugh. *Hee hee, she has a name. She conceptually exists. Which means I can fake her. No matter how complex her being appears to be, how impossible it might seem, if she exists, I can—* “Become you, Elise!”

It was a challenge to the gods themselves—a pledge to challenge the very laws of the world.

Zeleburg gazed upon “Elise” and smiled. He too was a greater demon who sought to join the ranks of those who controlled the world. His meeting with “Elise” could be considered nothing less than a matter of fate.

“All right, Elise. I shall grant you power. The power to overcome a higher existence.”

“Yes—yes...”

“A power granted by Lord Asmodeus. The power to pierce the world’s laws.”

And so Elise received this power from Zeleburg in the form of a shining silver blade with a glowing tip. The beauty of its slender form struck her core, with its graceful adamantine curves polished like a mirror, perfect for a Demon of Reflection, a shovel— “WAIT—NO—WHAT THE HELL?!”

Around that point, Elise leapt out of her dream as quickly as possible.

“Ah, did you notice, shovel?”

In any case, Princess Lithisia’s attempt at Shovel Mind Control ended in failure.

Calm yourself, Elise. Calm yourself!

Now awake, Elise (still Shovel Tied-Up) waited for her chance while beads of sweat rolled down her forehead. That had been a close call. The princess very obviously wanted to put her under a sort of mind control. In reality, Zeleburg had bequeathed Elise with an artifact called the Devil's Eye.

"I won't fall to you! Your brainwashing is nothing! Nothing, I say!"

This of course put Lithisia in a disashoveled state (disappointed.) "Aw, I've messshoveled up."

"Hrm, we didn't get the info we were looking for. Her Anti-Shovel aptitude must be high," said Alan.

Poor girl is in for a world of even more trauma... thought Catria.

Three humans stood in front of Elise. She glared furiously at the man standing in the middle. *I know who you really are. You're...you're the kind of being I will never, ever forgive.*

"You're hiding your true form, aren't you? Pantheon Master!"

"Preshovelly!"

"Lithisia, quiet," said Alan. "And I told you, I'm just a miner."

Elise sucked in a powerful breath. "Do you really expect me to believe that *just* a miner shot a Wave Motion Blast at me?!"

Catria made a pitying expression that seemed to say "Well, yeah."

He's making a fool of me! Elise angrily thought to herself. But since she was wearing Lithisia's face, she just looked exceptionally cute.

"Fine. I didn't expect you to own up to it anyway." Even though she was tied up with Shovel String, her abilities weren't in any way incapacitated. "Take this!"

"Hrm?"

Shiiing!

Elise's eyes began to glow. These were her God-class Reflection Eyes, her trump card. With these eyes, she could analyze any target, break it apart at the atomic level, the magical level, and even the conceptual level. She had

developed the skill specifically so that she might one day face the Lord of Souls and return the favor of that one fateful day.

For now, she would analyze the miner and copy him!

As the glow in her eyes faded, data flowed directly into Elise's mind. "You let your guard down, so-called Miner Alan! This is your true form!"

The data she collected floated in midair as she smiled victoriously.

NAME: Alan.

OCCUPATION: Miner.

RACE: Half-dwarf, half-human.

AGE: 1,011 years old.

After using his shovel to mine a mountain for one hundred straight years, it began to shoot beams. After three hundred years, those beams evolved into the Wave Motion Shovel Blast. Eventually, he mined his way through four digits of layers, hitting layer 6,666 and facing off with the Great Demon Demogorgon, who he subsequently sealed away with his point-blank Wave Motion Shovel Blast—

"Wait, what the hell is this?! This is all BS! This can't be real!" Elise screamed. "How could a human have lived for a thousand years?!"

"Honestly, I don't know." Even Alan didn't understand how that had come to pass.

Elise exploded with rage. "There's no way you suddenly sprouted the ability to fire a Wave Motion Blast just because you swung your shovel for three hundred years!"

Catria nodded enthusiastically as if to say "I know, right?!"

"You'd be surprised," said Alan.

"LIKE HELL!" Catria and Elise howled in harmony. The latter was breathing heavily as her thoughts ricocheted through her head.

Man, it's so nice having a partner for these kinds of moments, Catria thought

to herself for the nth time.

“Hrm, an analysis-type, huh? You’re the kind of demon who’s seen many an information battle.”

“In other words, she has Shovel Potential, shovel! Let’s make her our new Shovel Ally, shovel!”

“Princess... You know what? Never mind.” Catria shook her head. It wasn’t even worth it anymore. The princess was no good (in every sense of the term).

“Tsk, as expected of a God-class entity,” Elise growled. “You can resist me with techniques I’ve never heard of.”

“Really, I’m just a miner.”

Catria steeled herself against interjecting with iron-clad resolve.

“But...” Elise had taken down a lower-class God before. While a God-class entity might have an air-tight guard, those who followed them were typically riddled with vulnerabilities—exactly like the girl whose form Elise was borrowing, who now stood next to Alan and spoke some kind of inhuman tongue.

“Princess Lithisia, perhaps you know this man’s secret,” Elise directed her attention toward the princess with a smile.

“Shovel?”

“Ah, wait! Please, anything but that, Elise!” Upon realizing what was about to happen, Catria tried to step in.

It was too late. Elise saw it all. She gazed into Lithisia’s eyes with her Reflection Eyes. *Now, if I take your memories—* A single moment later, Elise’s brain shovelsploded.

NAME: Shovelthisia.

PERSONALITY: Shovel.

OBJECTIVE: Shovel conquer the world so that she can do the dirty shovel scoopy scoop with Sir Miner. Shovel. Shovel. Shovel dovely Sir Miner. Spread this shovel

throughout all the world shovel, shovel—

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE, NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

“This is bad! The princess’s corruption is taking hold. Alan, do something!”

“I’ll try my best.”

It took a whopping three hours, but Alan somehow managed to purify Elise’s shovel corruption.

“Haaah, haaah... Sh-shovel...shovel... Wait, no...!”

Unfortunately, said corruption ran deep. Tears welled in Elise’s tired eyes as she trembled, but her gaze never once wavered from Alan’s shovel. Whenever she looked at it, her heart raced without stop. She wanted to shovey shovey. What did that even mean? She didn’t know. She didn’t know, but she wanted to do a super good shovey dovey and feel extra goody woody— “Princess Lithisia!” she gasped. “You tried to brainwash me, didn’t you?!”

“Nope. I just scooped your shovel with my shovel!”

“I don’t get it!”

“Lithisia, please.” Alan directed his shovel at Elise once more. “You need to stop. If you resist any further, it’ll be dangerous (for Elise).”

“Ngh!”

“Now listen, I’m just a miner. You go back and tell Zeleburg that.”

Elise directed her angry, bitter gaze at Alan. She had no doubt, none at all, that this man was, no matter his claims, a Pantheon Master. He was just, for some reason, trying to make it look like he was a human who used a shovel. But in truth he was laughing at her, looking down on her! This cursed God-class entity!

I’ll never forgive him.

“Hee... Hee hee hee...” And so Elise laughed. *A God-class entity I can’t hope to defeat in my current state. This man who made a fool of me. What an unbearable creature.*

Up until now, Elise’s goal had been to copy the King of Hell, Demogorgon,

whose power was said to rival that of the gods of creation, and to therefore become the ultimate reality—in other words, to become a God-class entity in her own right. But the perfect target already stood right in front of her.

“Miner Alan!” Elise abruptly pointed at Alan. She had made her decision. “I will become you, no matter what!”

“...”

Alan took a moment to stare at her. “Enh. Fine. Then continue along the path of the reflection.”

“Huh?”

Alan looked straight into Elise’s eyes, but she saw neither hate nor anger in his expression. Rather, she met the gentle gaze of a teacher regarding his student.

“Wh-what’s with you?!”

“All this means is that you too will travel the path of the miner,” he said.

Catria blinked as if to say “Er, what?”

Elise went silent for a bit, but soon her body began to shake. The look he gave her, so teacherly and kind... In other words, the kind of gaze one might give a person who followed one’s creed.

In Alan’s case, this was exactly right. He was a miner seeking to perfect the way of the shovel just as Elise, the Demon of Reflection, sought to perfect the way of the copy. The two were terribly alike in their pursuit of a singular path.

“YOU DARE INSULT ME?!”

But that wasn’t how Elise saw it. She thought herself seen, known, and pitied. She couldn’t stand for it. To Elise, Alan hid his true form behind the absurdity of the shovel while laughing at those beneath him—he was someone she utterly despised.

“I’ll never forgive you! I’ve decided, Alan. You and you alone, I’ll never forgive!” Elise then threw something—a teleport stone. Her form began to contort and shift, and while it did, she continued to spew vitriol at Alan. *He made a fool of me! I’ll never forgive him! I’ll expose him for what he is!*

“Alan! Alan! I’ll remember your name! I’ll never forgive you!”

Finally, Elise vanished.

“Hrmph, she got away,” Alan said as he poked his shovel at space. “As expected. She really is a Demon of Reflection. She’s perfected her craft.”

“What happened with your astral pitfalls?” Catria asked. Hadn’t he dug them to prevent her flight?

“She circumvented them. Did you see how she teleported while shoveling insults at me nonstop?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Get it? She shoveled insults at me. Her shovels canceled mine out.”

“That’s completely absurd,” Catria replied, though she was simultaneously impressed by the copycat. Elise had to be quite the demon to be able to escape Alan’s shovel.

“On the other hand…” Catria trailed off. *There’s no way she’s not getting an earful when she gets back to her people.*

“Oh, Zeleburg, I’ve found someone at last! Someone with the power to rival the Great Demon Demogorgon—nngh!”

Back at the Dark Palace, Zeleburg sat on his throne and closed his eyes whilst listening to Elise’s report. According to her, this God-class entity had fired a Wave Motion Blast from a shovel. The Pantheon Master also appeared to have brainwashed Lithisia.

“Elise, you seem exhausted.”

“Wha?!”

Zeleburg didn’t show any indication of entertaining her claims. “In no world could a shovel fire a Wave Motion Blast.”

It was hard to argue with that.

“I-It was an illusion, though! He was hiding his true identity as a God-class entity!”

“He fooled your eyes? You, the Demon of Reflection? Doubtful.”

“N-no, but...”

Zeleburg refused to listen further.

Elise stormed out of the throne room. She could do nothing but grind her teeth. It was then that she made a vow to herself: “Alan, you can’t fool my eyes!”

She had no doubt that Alan was some kind of “being” who had surpassed the laws of man and God. Her instincts as the Demon of Reflection and the strange experiences she had earlier witnessed told her as much. The existence that was Alan the Miner was the world’s greatest mystery.

In other words, he is my greatest objective.

“I’ll become you no matter what, Alan!”

Elise didn’t yet know that she had taken the first step toward tumbling down a road without end.

Part 56:

The Miner Builds Shoveland

AT THE END of the first day of their campaign, the Holy Shovel Knights ended their military exercises for the day and made camp by a local farming village.

On Lithisia's orders, their route on the first day took them on a rectangular path. In other words, immediately after setting off, they simply did a tour of all the villages in the area. From the perspective of a strategist, this route made no sense whatsoever, but at this point, the Holy Shovel Knights only employed shovetegists. In other words, the only opinion on the subject was, "Shovel!"

In other-other words, a squad of shovels whose heads had been messed with by shovels shoveled in a shovel in order to shovel the shovel.

However, oddly enough, Catria's head hurt like the devil for reasons other than this.

"All hail Princess Lithisia!"

"All hail the Rostir Liberation Front!"

The problem was that this strategy had actually proved pretty solid.

As night set in, Catria screamed in the center of the village. "How do we have more soldiers?!"

"If you put shovels in the hands of youngsters, they're basically already soldiers, shovel."

Zeleburg's minions lurked in every village, which meant the villagers were always on the verge of being sacrificed. But thanks to Alan and Catria's Wave Motion Shovel Blasts, those minions had been obliterated in an instant. In this way, they'd liberated eight villages today alone. The folks they freed were then handed shovels, raising the Liberation Front's Shovel Power.

Basically, this route had allowed them to liberate the nation piece by piece while simultaneously amassing more military might.

"Well done, Lithisia. Way to think ahead," Alan said, nodding.

After all, Lithisia had come up with this plan.

“No, there’s no way she was thinking ahead. She was definitely just thinking about shovels...” Catria moaned. But she didn’t have the energy to argue the point. The facts were the facts. Lithisia’s madness had panned out, intentionally or not, and the knight was in no place to complain.

As for the princess in question, she was in the village square chatting with some children.

Crap, there’s no way she isn’t brainwashing them with her shovel nonsense, Catria thought.

As they approached, Lithisia turned around.

“Um, Sir Miner, er...” Her long golden hair blew in the wind and she looked quite concerned. “Sir Miner, are you at all familiar with growing shrops?”

“Crops?”

“Please don’t translate her.” Catria didn’t realize she herself had also understood Lithisia’s words.

Nonetheless, the princess explained. The children she was talking to were the sons and daughters of farmers, and lately the fields had given forth no crops to speak of. Even though the Holy Shovel Knights had driven out the demons, if nothing changed, everyone would soon die of starvation.

Alan gave it a moment of thought, then shook his head. “I’m a miner, not a farmer. I’m afraid I’m not the specialist you need.”

“Is that shovel? Aw, I really want to do something for the people here...” Wearing a grave expression, Lithisia lost herself in thought.

Needless to say, Catria was stunned; every time the princess displayed some remotely human emotion, she was taken aback.

“I’ve got it!” shouted Lithisia, and a radiant smile spread across her face.

At the same time, Catria felt a chill. She had that same bad feeling she always got, and she could already imagine what was about to happen.

“Sir Miner, you designed and built the World Tree Castle, which means you’re

extra good at construction!”

There was little doubt in Catria’s mind that Lithisia was about to ask Alan to craft a shovel statue.

“What do you want to make?”

“Well, you see, there’s a nice, open field right here.” Lithisia clapped her hands together. “Let’s build Shoveland right here! A tourist attraction!”

Catria was only off in terms of scale, and in terms of that, she was off by a lot.

Shoveland, as described by Lithisia, would be a Shovel-Themed Shovelpark that everyone from kids to couples to families could come and shovel at and enjoy. Its catchphrase would be, “Even a human can become a shovel.” By bringing in tourists from all over the continent, the village would see financial success and they’d be able to spread the Shovel Faith. Two birds with one shovel.

“What are you going on about, Your Highness?” Catria whispered in response to the shovel words piercing her ears.

But Lithisia wasn’t listening, of course. “Please, shovel! Build Shoveland, Sir Miner!”

“I’ve never built a tourist attraction before, but it sounds interesting. I’ll do it.”

Alan generally listened to any and all requests from Lithisia, so he got to digging up the field at unbelievable speed.

Clank, clank, clank! The trails of his shovel moved at light speed as the arid field became host to an enormous theme park even larger than a palace garden.

It was surrounded by adamantine walls, within which a massive trolley track pierced the mining mountain, and shovel-shaped horse carriages moved in time with a shovel-shovel melody. Standing like a spire in the center was Castle Shoverrella (named by Lithisia), shaped like a shovel.

“Hrm, done.”

It took approximately thirty-seven minutes.

Alan wiped the sweat off his brow.

Catria stared on in defeated silence.

The village youngsters stood with mouths agape in similar silence, their eyes wide, pupils expanding. They couldn't be faulted; a massive theme park more beautiful and grand than a palace had suddenly appeared in front of their very eyes, after all.

The only people whose eyes were normal were Alan and Lithisia.

“Shovestruction shofection! (Sir Miner's shovel construction is as shovelly perfect as ever!)”

“This is my first time creating a place specifically for recreation. We'll have to try it out to be certain of its effectiveness.”

“Which means we all get to go on a date in Shoveland! In other words, a shovedate!”

“Hold. Your. Horses.”

Of course, Lithisia did not in fact hold any horses. Rather, she pulled Catria along and wrapped her arm around Alan's, entering the theme park.

“Oh, right! The Ferris wheel fits four, so let's get someone else!”

“Good idea. Let's call Alice.” Catria threw Alice under the bus without a shred of guilt; she refused to take the brunt of the upcoming shovel suffering.

“You damned traitor!”

Catria felt like she could hear the Undead King cry out and curse her name, but she probably just imagined it. Arguably, she had lately begun to enjoy the shoveling in her own way, so it was feasible that she was actually pretty content right now.

“No, let's call Lucy. I want to go with Alice alone... Hee hee.” The princess giggled as she glanced sidelong at the Shotel (Shovel Hotel) in the center of Shoveland. No doubt, Alice would meet a terrible fate there. “Which is why we

should call Lucy, shovel!”

Alan twisted his shovel, and a moment later, a winged angel dressed in pure-white robes appeared. “Huh? Wha? Where am I?!”

“Shovel Summon. You’re a shovel angel, after all,” said Alan.

“No! No more shovels! Catria, please! Save me!” Lucy wailed.

“Let us combat the shovels together,” Catria agreed.

“Nooooooooo! I wanna go back!!”

Either way, as long as there were more folks to share the shovel suffering, it was all good in Catria’s book.

“Welcome, shovel!”

The park gates were built of wood, not unlike the entrance to a mine. A Shovel Soldier at the gates asked to see their tickets. Lithisia showed the soldier her shovel.

The soldier nodded. “Anyone with a shovel gets in for free. Enjoy your shovel time.”

What a polite soldier, thought Catria, because any other thought was too dangerous to entertain.

“First thing up is the Merry-Go-Shovel,” said Alan. “It’s two people per seat, so let’s split up.”

“Since there are four of us, we’ll compete for the right to ride with Sir Miner!”

“No, thank you. Please, Your Highness. Feel free to ride with Alan. I’ll stay with Lucy here.”

Lucy nodded fervently, trembling in fear.

If either of them risked going anywhere alone with Alan in this strange space, their brains would be in real danger of total corruption.

“Shovel?!” Lithisia’s eyes lit up for a moment. But she soon shook her head. “This is the shovel nation of dreams, Shoveland! Everyone is equal here, shovel!”

Lithisia's logic made no sense, but she meant it. And so the princess recommended a sholottery (they would dig into the ground, and the first person to dig up the lottery ticket would be the winner).

"Sir Miner, please grant your Shovel Blessing upon me..."

Sadly, Catria ended up the victor, and in a matter of seconds. She tried to hold back, but her body moved on its own. "This was a conspiracy!" she moaned. "A conspiracy, I tell you!"

"Grr... I'll step aside this once, Catria."

The outcome left both Lithisia and Lucy tremendously disappointed and on the verge of tears, if for entirely different reasons.

"Fine. Let's just ride this thing and be done with it," Catria muttered.

"Shall we, Catria?" said Alan.

The Merry-Go-Shovel came equipped with shovels shaped like horses that could seat two at a time. The background music played a truly mind-numbing song to the tune of: "Shooovelll! Sho, sho, vel! Shovel!"

Lyrics: Lithisia. Arrangement: Alan.

Needless to say, this ride was not designed for human enjoyment.

"D-damn you, Alan," Catria muttered.

He sat behind her on the horse (shovel?), holding her hips. His face pressed into her back, and she could feel his breath. Catria was so embarrassed she fully expected herself to just up and die. Her chest burned red-hot.

"Hmph... Why did Catria have to go and dig up that one spot?" Lithisia whined.

Meanwhile, Lucy sat pale and stiff behind Lithisia, saying an awful lot of nothing.

The princess's intense gaze dug into Catria's back. Her jealousy was as plain and hot as the sun magnified by the reflection of a shovel.

"A-Alan, don't hold me so tightly... Hey..."

"The rules of this recreational facility demand you tightly hold on to the hips

of the person in front of you. If I don't take them seriously, this will hardly function as a test."

"Why do you have to be serious about this, of all things?!"

"So I can save this country."

"I agree with your objective, but don't you think you're going about this the wrong way?!"

Right about then, the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia at Catria's waist began to ring loudly. The time to recharge its Anti-Shovel Power had come.

"HOOOOLD ON!"

"Hrm, where can I shovel while holding your hips... Here?"

"NNGH?! H-hey, stop it! N-not there! My stomach is... GAAAAH?!"

Three minutes later, Catria's stomach had been shoveled quite thoroughly, and she twitched on the ground, sweating profusely.

Lithisia shot a fierce look of jealousy at her nigh-comatose knight. "Th-this time I'll win the lottery, shovel!"

But in the end, Lucy came up victorious. Together with Alan, she vanished to go ride the Jet Trolley Shovel (an attraction in which two people rode a trolley together and changed routes using a shovel.) Left behind, Lithisia despaired, looking defeated next to the still recovering Catria. "Aww... Shovel..."

She shot another jealous look at Catria's stomach, which gave the lady knight cramps.

Only moments earlier, Allen had used a small shovel to dig at it. Even now, it itched, and it even felt a bit hot.

"Catria...could I shovel your stomach, shovel?" Lithisia audibly licked her lips as she studied Catria's stomach.

The lady knight writhed at the lingering memory of Alan and his shovel. "Like hell you can!"

"Shovel... Aw..." Lithisia was the picture of a mournful maiden, and the sight made Catria's chest sting ever so slightly.

Her mistress's personality was a mess—okay, maybe everything about her was a mess—but the knight knew that the princess really did love Alan, and that shone through no matter how messy she was.

Man, augh, jeez. Catria muttered, “You should just marry Alan and be done with it.”

“Shovel?!” Lithisia twitched. Her face utterly pink, she covered her lips with her red shovel to hide her expression. “But, I mean, you’re also a shovel, right?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you mean by that, but I can confirm that I am not, in fact, a shovel.”

“A-anyway, that’ll never happen, no matter what, shovel,” Lithisia forced out.

Something had definitely happened between Lithisia and Alan, but before Catria could ask, the miner and Lucy returned with a loud crash.

Multiple instances of the word “shovel” were written in black all over Lucy’s cheeks. “No more shovels, pleeeeeease,” she whispered to herself.

Apparently, this theme park was dangerous even for angels. But enough of that.

“Last but not least is the Ferrshovel Wheel,” said Alan.

“Take the princess. We need a break.” Catria grabbed Lithisia and pushed her toward the miner.

“Shovel?! (Catria?!)”

Lithisia panicked, but Catria leaned in and whispered. “Your Highness, now’s your chance. Please talk to Alan. Tell him the truth.”

“Th-the truth, shovel?!”

“You have something you want to tell him, don’t you?”

Lithisia turned bright red in panic. “Sho-sho-sho-shovel?!” she cried.

Catia released another large sigh. Seriously, this princess was a mess. *This girl, for real...*

“Shovel... Shovel... Shovel...” Lithisia fretted, rocking back and forth.

My mistress sure is a handful of a shovel maiden.

Part 57:

Lithisia's First Shovel Kiss

THE FERRSHOVEL WHEEL was designed to be a popular ride for couples. In the center of the gondola for two, a magic video stone dug up and projected the pair's "Shovel" Memories onto the glass windows. But what exactly were Shovel Memories? Even Alan didn't know the answer to that question.

As such, Alan had Shovel Copied part of Lithisia's soul and used it to create the device that determined and selected Shovel Memories. One could say this particular ride was a part of Lithisia herself.

Aaahhh...

And so Lithisia sat together with Alan inside the Ferrshovel Wheel, their shoulders nestled side by side like lovers. She couldn't dig up the words to speak. Basically, she was beyond embarrassed.

Badump, badump, badump.

Lithisia struggled to muster the courage to look Alan in the eyes. After all, not only were their shoulders touching, she could feel his body heat. *Alan* was next to her. That alone was nearly enough to make her melt in shovelly joy. His proximity made her feel like she didn't care about the whole Zeleburg Assashovenation Plan or her Shovel Messiah Plan. Who could have thought she could be so happy without ever needing to confess?

"Lithisia," said Alan.

"GERFLASHOVEL?!"

Alan's mouth opened as if he were about to actually interject with regards to her bizarre scream. Instead, he said, "It's about time for the playback of our Shovel Memories. I assume I can go first?"

"Ah, y-yeah, that's fine." Lithisia abruptly stopped speaking; her nerves were too powerful.

Would she even be in Alan's Shovel Memories?

For many years, Lithisia had been said to be the most beautiful girl in all the land. But those who had said so had based their assessment on human standards. Did human standards mean anything to shovels? Lithisia had tried so very hard to become a shovel, but in the end, she had failed.

Right now, she was neither human nor shovel, just a middling halfling shovel girl. If anything, Catria was more like a shovel of late. She had shot a Wave Motion Shovel Blast before Lithisia did too (quite frankly, Lithisia was extshovelly jealous).

But even then...

Sir Miner, please... Lithisia put her hands together and prayed. *I won't ask to be your number one, but I'd be so happy if you kept at least a tiny spot for me in your Shovel Memories... Please, shovel...*

Holding those feelings close to her chest, Lithisia peeked at the video projected by the magic stone. It displayed the image of a blonde girl in a risqué white bikini. Her breasts swelled as she brought her arms together and looked up at Alan, asking if she was “shovel enough.”

In other words, it was Lithisia—specifically, as she had appeared when they sought the Green Orb in the seas of Lactia.

“EEEEEEK, SHOVEL?!” Lithisia panicked and stood up in the gondola, hiding the video with her body.

Surprisingly, Alan raised his voice in a slight panic as well. “Sh-shovel?! Shovel?!”

The princess's eyes spun. “S-Sir Miner, this is your shovelest memory of me?!”

“I don't even know what that means, but...” Given that it was being projected on the glass, that had to be the case. This was, in fact, the first time Alan really seemed to understand the use of “shovel” as an adjective.

As Alan explained as much, smoke seemed to rise from the top of Lithisia's head; she felt small. Truth be told, she had actually been pretty focused at the time. Back during the search for the Green Orb, she had been excited by all the water and worn that crazy bikini, but now that she thought about it, that was ridiculous! It really didn't cover up, like, anything... And since this was Alan's

memory, he had evidently noticed.

“Huh? Ah? Er, aaaaaagh.” Lithisia was simultaneously embarrassed and happy beyond her wildest dreams. She clenched her fists, clutching her dress as she fidgeted. That was when she realized she was wearing a long skirt—her usual princess dress. Would Alan have been happier if she wore her miniskirt? Actually—“U-um, sh-should I wear a bikini from here on out?”

“Why?! No, don’t. Please.”

“Shovel?!” Lithisia had put her everything into that offer, yet he turned it down at Mach speed. How could she not feel bad?

“Lithisia, you must never dress like that in front of anyone but the person you love.”

“Huh? But... Urgh...”

“It’s true that I recognized your beauty, but I wish you’d show a little more restraint.”

“Um! Sir Miner, I!”

“Hrm?”

Lithisia stopped in her tracks. The words that came after “I”... If she said them, there’d be no turning back. Would she say them? Would she actually say them? Would Alan accept those words? Would he think of her only as a failshovel (a girl who failed to become a shovel)? What if he abandoned her?

But even then.

“Sir Miner, I-I’ve always...” Her tears flowed freely, but the words didn’t stop coming. This, Lithisia wouldn’t fail to do. “I’ve always...!”

Since the day they met. She clenched her fists and found the words of her confession.

“I’ve always...shoveled you!”

The video had long since stopped.

Lithisia stared at Alan, breathing heavily. Her lips pressed tight together, the expression on her face that of someone who had just finished the hardest job of

their entire life (or shovelflife).

On the flip side, Alan focused all his brain power into pondering a single thing: What did “shovel” mean in this instance?

“...”

Truth be told, Alan didn’t understand approximately 90 percent of the shovel things Lithisia said. He believed it pointless to ask for clarification, considering the answer would undoubtedly be something along the lines of, “shovelly shovel the shovel of shovels!” That was why Alan usually let her words fly over his head.

But not this time.

Lithisia was entirely earnest. She was stiff and staring, trembling with tension, like a maiden waiting for a response to her wedding proposal. (Honestly, that’s exactly what this was.)

The miner had to meet her head-on. In Hell, Alan had said he’d take full responsibility for Lithisia, so even if he didn’t understand her feelings, he would accept them.

“You...shovel me?”

Lithisia nodded furiously. “I do! I shovel you so very very much!”

“I see. You shovel me. I’m...shoveled.”

“I shovel you with all of my shovel!” Lithisia gazed at Alan, tears in her eyes as her heart raced. They were the eyes of someone hoping for something in return.

It wouldn’t be enough to just accept her feelings.

“So what would you have me do...?” Alan asked.

“?! ”

“I understand that you shovel me (whatever that means.) So what do you want from me?”

“Ah, um, er, I!” Lithisia hesitated.

This was not the response she had expected, but now that she thought about

it, what did people do after confessing? Lithisia had no idea. Marriage? Baby-making? No, those would have to wait until after they reclaimed her country. Then should she ask him to *do* something with her? No! She could never say something so embarrassing! At the end of the day, her heart was that of a pure shovel maiden.

“Shovel... Shovel...” Lithisia came upon an answer. “Kiss...”

“Hrm?”

“I want you to shovel...kiss me.” Her cheeks were on fire. Lithisia had let her emotions take the wheel and actually requested a kiss!

“All right, I understand.”

“Shovel?! ”

Alan held Lithisia at the waist and pulled her close, then brought his face near hers. The princess’s heartbeat drummed in her ears; this was the moment she had always dreamed of, all she had to do was wait for Alan’s lips and—

Clank.

She heard the sound of something rubbing against metal.

“Shovel...?” When Lithisia opened her eyes, she found Alan’s adamantite shovel near her lips. The miner had put his shovel before her and smiled kindly.

“A Shovel Kiss. In other words, you want to kiss a shovel, yeah?”

“ ... ”

“If you’re fine with my shovel, feel free to use it as much as you’d like.”

“?! ”

Apparently, Alan had confused her “kiss” request with a “Shovel Kiss.” Lithisia tried to summon the courage to tell him that wasn’t quite what she’d had in mind, but she couldn’t.

As for why, well, she also wanted to kiss his shovel. Its glowing metal head was so sturdy. Being able to kiss the tip of the shovel from which Alan fired his Wave Motion Shovel Blast would *also* make her extremely happy.

Consequently, Lithisia’s eyes sparkled when faced with the shovel. “Shovel...!”

In all senses of the phrase, it was too late for Lithisia. Just as she brought her lips to the metal head—

Peck!

Lithisia felt something hard against her lips.

“?!?!?!?”

“Mm...”

It was Alan. His kiss was that of a man with willpower made of steel. Just like Lithisia, he too had brought his lips close to the shovel and he kissed the opposite side. This was his earnest attempt to translate her request to Shovel Kiss him; the two of them would kiss the shovel at the same time. One could describe it as a form of indirect kiss.

“...!”

It was burning hot. That was Lithisia’s first impression. She could feel Alan’s warmth through the shovel, and she almost passed out from the tremendous sensation. The Shovel Kiss felt like it dug everything out of her head.

“Whew... How was that?”

Tens of seconds later, Alan pulled away from the shovel and Lithisia gazed at him. Her lids drooped, and she could only muster out a single sound.

“Sho...”

“Huh?”

“I shovel you, Sir Miner.” Her body trembled with glee as her impressions of the moment bubbled over. “My first Shovel Kiss... Amazing!”

She collapsed. Even her reactions befit her status as a Shovel Princess.

“She’s asleep...”

Lithisia fell fast asleep after being overwhelmed by her emotions. Alan rested her head on his lap as he gently caressed her golden hair and sighed. He had no idea what had just transpired, but there was one thing he knew: after that Shovel Kiss with Lithisia, he was filled with a warm feeling, a profound desire to

hold the princess in his arms.

“That was an incredible kiss, Lithisia...” Perhaps what he felt at that moment was the feeling Lithisia described as “shovel.”

Alan continued to caress Lithisia’s head as he thought about this, thinking and thinking back on their kiss.

“So that’s what kisses taste like.”

On that day, Alan discovered that first kisses taste like adamantite.

Part 58:

The Lady Knight Saves the Fake Princess

AT AROUND THE SAME TIME as the miner and the princess shared a Shovel Kiss, Catria sat on a bench near the Merry-Go-Shovel.

“Asleep, I see...”

Next to her, Lucy clung to Catria’s waist and breathed quietly. With a single touch of the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia’s Anti-Shovel Power, Catria had cleaned away the “shovel” words scrawled over Lucy’s face, allowing her lovely features to breathe. That one touch had purified Lucy of all traces of Shovel Corruption.

“Ah... Ahhh! If you ever get another one like this, please give it to me!” Lucy had sobbed, clinging to the light of hope.

Catria didn’t have the heart to tell Lucy about what it took to recharge the scabbard’s Anti-Shovel Power, as it would only have driven Lucy into deeper despair. Making little angels sad was antithetical to the duty of a knight.

“I didn’t know this scabbard could affect others too.”

Might she be able to erase Lithisia’s corruption with the scabbard? Catria momentarily considered the idea before judging it too dangerous. Lithisia’s inability to use the orbs meant she was no longer truly human; she was closer to being a shovel. If the princess touched the scabbard, she might very well disappear.

Am I now cursed to forever serve a shovel-esque princess? Catria gazed into the distance, her eyes filled with despair.

“Huh? Princess?”

Catria saw a familiar-looking blonde girl in a dress strolling down the Shovel Path. From a distance, she was most certainly Lithisia, but something was off. She kind of wobbled, as if unwell, but on top of that, at the moment, she should’ve been riding the Ferrshovel Wheel.

“Wait, then that means—”

Catria left Lucy on the bench and dashed toward the figure, only to be met with a grim truth.

“Aaaah... Shovel... No, shovel... No! Silence, me!”

“It’s you, Elise.”

Just as Catria thought, it was the fake princess, Elise of the Reflection, who had earlier escaped them. Her present condition was tragic.

“Shovel... Shovel... Ngh, aaah, you can do it! You can do it, Eliiiiise!!!”

With tears flowing from her eyes, Elise pushed against some invisible force.

It was clear as day that she’d been corrupted by the shovel. Every few seconds, her eyes sparkled like shovels, and to make matters worse, she kept making Shovel Signs (quite skillfully) with her fingers and sucking on Shandies (Shovel Candies.)

“This is terrible.”

It really was.

Had Elise doomed herself when she peered into the depths of Lithisia’s shovel obsession? She had done her best to resist at the moment, but it had been only a matter of time before she fell into the dark, dark shovel hole. With that in mind, Catria couldn’t help but frown sympathetically at the demon.

“Wait...” Catria glanced down at the scabbard on her hip. It would be too dangerous to cleanse the real princess’s corruption, but what about Elise? *Let’s just call it an experiment.*

“Please work.”

Catria touched her scabbard to Elise’s unguarded chest.

“Nnnnnnnngh?!”

Elise vibrated as if a jolt of electricity ran through her body. The shandy fell from her mouth and her eyes regained their humanity. She hadn’t really been human to begin with so that probably wasn’t accurate, but the important bit here was that she was no longer careening toward shovelhood.

“Where...am I?” Elise was totally lost. If nothing else, she’d managed to return

to her normal evil demon self. She glanced about her surroundings, her gaze landing on Catria. “Ngh! How dare you, Knight Catria! I never asked for your help!”

She seemed disappointed with herself more than anything.

“Er, excuse me?”

“I was just about to break that self-proclaimed miner’s brainwashing all on my own!”

“Actually, that was all the princess. Also, it was super obvious you were nowhere close to doing that.”

Especially given the way Elise had been sucking on shandies. She had been basically full-on Lithisia (shovel) at that point.

“I don’t care! I would’ve made it work!” Elise screamed, tears of true frustration in her eyes. “I wasn’t even brainwashed by Alan himself, just one of his followers... Ugh!”

Elise angrily stomped on the Shovel Path. By “follower,” she no doubt meant Lithisia.

“Who cares about shovels?! I, Elise of the Reflection, will never lose against a joke like that!”

“Yeah, no, totally.”

Catria realized with faint surprise that she was smiling. She couldn’t help but feel a sense of kinship with Elise’s attempts to resist the shovel.

“Hrmph, but after going through this brainwashing, I think I’ve finally gotten a handle on things,” said Elise.

“Define ‘things.’”

“Alan. His true identity is that of a greater God-class entity who governs over spirit.” Once again, Elise found herself saying something rather sad without realizing it.

“Not so much.”

“Yes so much.”

“Nope,” Catria stated definitively.

While she agreed that Alan’s humanity was up for debate, after traveling with him over the last few months, Catria knew better. He really was just a jewel miner who used his shovel to dig into the ground. That was what made it all so absurd. He was no “God-class entity” or whatever. The proof lay in Alan’s dedication to the concept of common sense. His thinking wasn’t abnormal, just his power.

The princess, on the other hand, absolutely lacked anything resembling basic logical principle.

Catria tried to explain this, but Elise shook her head.

“You’re naïve, Catria. That too is part of his brainwashing.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?”

“Think about it really carefully. Seriously.” Elise’s gaze was super serious.

“There’s simply no way that a human could live three hundred years or whatever and suddenly learn how to fire a Wave Motion Blast just from digging with a shovel!”

Catria had no reply because, frankly, that made sense. But the theory that Alan somehow qualified as a deity was even more ridiculous.

“And then there’s his follower and her awful way of thinking. Ah, aaah! Just thinking about it makes me so angry!”

Elise began to tremble and whisper the word “shovel,” so Catria panicked and pressed her scabbard against the demon girl again.

“That...thing next to Alan! What the hell is that thing?!” Elise wailed.

“I know, right?” Catria agreed with Elise on a deep level. That “thing” was indeed something else entirely, taking the form of a princess.

“So you understand at least that much? Yes... You really are the perfect fit.” Elise adjusted her dress, which was in a bit of disarray. “I remember now why I came here. For you.”

“Say wha?”

Elise extended her hand. “Come with me. Together, we shall fight that dreadful creature.”

“I already told you, I refuse.”

“I’m even more serious than last time. I mean...” Elise smiled faintly. “I took the liberty of peeking into your past with my power.”

“You did what?”

Elise giggled. “At your very core lies resentment, Catria. No wonder I love you so much. You resented yourself for being an inferior knight. For not being born a man. For not being a natural-born genius with a blade. You resented every form of yourself for lacking self-confidence.”

Catria stared deep into Elise’s eyes. If she were still the same person she had been when she set out on this journey, she might have lost herself in a rage. But she wasn’t that person now. Catria had spent the whole journey resisting Alan and Princess Lithisia’s fierce shovel attacks. She would not be swayed by the words of some demon.

“You know, I resented things too.” A grin formed on Elise’s lips. “I hated being insulted and looked down upon. I didn’t want to spend my days being toyed with by some unknown force. That’s why I decided to join the side of those pursuing greater power. No matter how many tens of thousands of years it takes, I’ll make that cursed God-class entity feel the same as I did!”

Elise pointed at Catria.

“You feel the same as I! You bitterly hate that your life has been overtaken by something as stupid as a shovel, do you not? You’ll never forgive that man for turning something you treasured into something worthless. I understand. You’re just like me. That’s why—” Elise took a deep breath, and, just as she was about to make her declaration to Catria—

Beeeeep!

The park’s Shovelcom system went off.

“You should sing ‘The park is now sholosed!’ with me!”

Multiple seconds passed as the announcement echoed.

Catria's cold expression read: "I knew this would happen."

On the other end, Elise stood in silent shock. She turned her gaze to one of the Shovelcoms (at the top of a Shovel Pole), and her cheeks grew red like she had just exploded.

"THIS IS WHY! THIS IS WHY I'LL NEVER LET SHOVELS HAVE THEIR WAY!!!" she howled, stomping.

"Yeah, well, good luck. I'll be cheering for you."

"Wait, Catria! Fight by my side against them!"

"Sorry, but nah," Catria said without giving it any thought.

"But why?!"

Honestly, Catria could not see a future in which she and Elise would win against the shovel. But more importantly, Elise was technically an evil demon. And even *more* importantly...

"You're right. I'm bitter and resentful about all manner of things the shovel has done to me."

Even so, in her mind's eye, Catria saw the image of a man and a woman holding a shovel. These two were massive threats to humanity and undoubtedly the source of a great deal of chaos in the world. However, Catria could not say they were anything much like Elise. That didn't just come from a place of loyalty.

"I never want to have their power," said Catria.

Elise wanted to become like Lithisia. But Catria would never ever think that way. She couldn't. *I want to be a human, and that's why I resist.*

"Hmph." This declaration clearly disappointed Elise. "I'll be on my way for now. But Catria, one day, you too will understand."

"Understand what exactly?"

"That in order to fight an overwhelming power from a higher dimension..." Elise's body began to disappear, likely a result of her teleportation spell. "One must 'It's sholosing time! Praise be the shovel!' a higher being—wait a minute

—”

The teleport did not in fact wait, and Elise vanished.

Catria was left whispering to herself. “I knew it, you’re no good.”

Elise had likely tried to say something like “One must become a higher being as well,” but in this case, that would just mean becoming a shovel. No matter what, Catria could see naught but a sad future awaiting Elise.

Part 59:

The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish (Part A)

WITH THEIR BREAK at Shoveland over, Alan and the others finally marched on the capital in earnest. Leading their forces was an endlessly cheerful Lithisia.

“For-ward! Shovels!” she called.

The Holy Shovel Knights moved via Shovel March (long version: singing “Shovel! Sho-vel!” while marching). This kind of Shovel Army would corrupt anyone’s mind at first glance.

“Shovely shovel (read as: this is the true) New Gen Holy Knights of Rostir, shovel!”

Lithisia was on cloud nine. Shovel cloud nine.

In back of her came Catria and Alan, who were not moving via Shovel Movement.

“Is this how the world ends?” Catria whispered with deadened eyes.

Her homeland of Rostir was on the verge of being overrun by shovels. Catria could no longer stop this force on her own. She certainly didn’t feel like she could, anyway.

“Catria, prepare your shovel and don’t let your guard down. Our true fight begins now.”

“No, I’d say the war’s already over.” It didn’t matter whether they faced demons or angels. Catria knew deep down that no force stood a chance against this army.

Truth be told, they’d already bumped into something like over ten thousand demons on their way so far. Alan and Catria hadn’t even needed to draw, as the knights had all used their shovels to plow through the enemy. Zero casualties. Sure, Rostir’s forces had Demon Shovelers equipped, but they were legit way too strong.

Yet Alan shook his head. “It’s always when one is making excellent progress in a dig that one runs into the hardest piece of earth.”

“Hrm, s-sure, I guess.”

“As shospecbattleshovel! (As expected of Sir Miner! You’re a real battlefield shovel!)”

“You’ve combined so many words that I don’t even know what you’re trying to say.”

“Shovel...”

Despite showing some measure of regret after Alan pointed this out, Lithisia still somehow seemed happy. Of course, the princess was always happy when she got to talk to Alan, but today was in a different league altogether. Her first Shovel Kiss in Shoveland had done a number on her; she was at maximum shovel levels of excitement.

“Um, um! Sir Miner!” Lithisia drew near and whispered into his ear. “Um, our advance is almost at an ‘L.’”

“Uh?”

“The last letter of ‘shovel’ is ‘L.’ Therefore, ‘L’ is the ‘end.’”

This was an absurd level of abbreviation.

“Hrm, I didn’t think of that. Not bad, Lithisia.”

“Shovel... S-so I was just wondering if you, um, remembered our promishovel?”

“Our promise... Ah, yes. The first one I made you.”

Lithisia fidgeted as her cheeks turned red, and Alan nodded. The princess had promised to reward him for serving as her bodyguard on this journey. Alan remembered that moment with Lithisia all too clearly.

“I’d be willing to do anything you ask of me after we reclaim my country.”

Back then, Lithisia had still spoken like a human. Alan had asked her to find him a successor, and she had agreed to do so.

It was at that very moment that a fatal misunderstanding had been born, and

even now, it was still screwing everything up.

“Hrm, but...”

Lithisia had promised she’d help him find a successor after she took her nation back. Lithisia still remembered too, but...

“The thing is, I already have Kuronono.”

Seconds passed.

“Shoveeeeeeeel?!”

The princess’s cry was entirely inhuman. Lithisia stopped in her tracks, as did the Shovel Army. With her red shovel clutched to her chest, Lithisia’s expression morphed into one of pure confusion. Even those watching her were forced to assume this same emotional state.

“K-K-Kuronono, shovel?!”

“Hrm? I thought that was all your doing, Lithisia.”

Lithisia had tried to take Kuronono home from the Light Nation because she had deemed her worthy of becoming Alan’s successor in the mines. Or at least, that was what Alan thought. On his end, he intended to properly recruit Kuronono once things in the Light Nation calmed down a bit.

“Huh? But that was just—I! I was only trying to spread the glory of the shovel to the Light Nation!”

“Erm, but I found her worthy of the role, Lithisia.”

“Sho...” Lithisia couldn’t even finish the word. She gripped her red shovel and continued to stare at Alan, fidgeting wildly as she tried to find the words she wanted to say. She repeated this process over and over. “Do you...shovel Kuronono more than...me?”

As usual, Alan didn’t understand Lithisia’s question. But at Shoveland, he had promised to accept her feelings regardless. That was why Alan thought hard before answering this question.

“Well, if I were to compare the two of you, I’d say she leans more toward

human.”

“...”

“Honestly, I have no issue with my successor being a human.”

“...!”

Lithisia’s expression remained as it was, but it took everything in her to keep it so. Her slender hands shook, as did her lips. She gripped her red shovel tightly. Alan’s words had delivered quite the shock. The princess looked up at the sky and took a few deep breaths. She closed her eyes and started whispering something to herself. *Sir Miner, Sir Miner... If you desire Kuronono, then...*

But all Alan could hear was the prayer word “ALAN.”

Lithisia seemed desperate to keep herself together.

“I...” At length, Lithisia suddenly smiled. She was sweating and even had tears in her eyes, but she nonetheless smiled. “I was actually thinking the same thing, scoopy!”

“Scoopy?!”

She was trying way too hard. “Er, no, I mean, shovel! Shovel!”

“No, no, no.”

It was too late to play this one off. Lithisia was lying through her teeth. The fact that she had said “scoopy” instead of “shovel” proved this. It indicated an incredible distance between her words and her true feelings. Alan could feel it in his bones: he had misunderstood some key element at play.

In a panic, Lithisia attempted to make excuses. “I-It’s not what you think! I was just...! I just!”

VROOOOOON.

Suddenly, the space in front of them morphed violently, giving way to a booming voice.

“Hee hee, welcome to our great nation, Princess Lithisia.”

Before them stood a man dressed in flowing robes and wearing a crown atop

his head: Zeleburg, floating in midair.

Lithisia seemed almost relieved as she turned around. “Shovel! (How rare of you to arrive with such nice timing, Zeleburg! I applaud your performance!)”

“Ooh, what a beautiful smile on your face. But what’s this about shovels?”

“Shovel, shovel! (Shovels are shovels!)”

“???”

Zeleburg was instantly driven to confusion by the princess’s bizarre words.

“What’s going on? No, wait, that man next to you...” Zeleburg knocked on his noggin a few times as he stared angrily at Alan. “That’s right! You’re the crude man who brushed my beloved princess’s teeth!”

Catria wore the expression of someone thinking “What the hell were you doing, Your Highness?”

Alan decided to play along for a bit to buy some time. “Exactly. And I’m not handing Lithisia over to you.”

“Shovel...” Lithisia’s chest tightened, but she shook her head quickly, trying to chase away her feelings.

“Ha ha, fascinating! Do you think a lowly human could really defeat a demon?” Zeleburg leered.

“Huh?” asked Alan.

“Haven’t you heard anything from Elise?” asked Lithisia.

“Elise...? Yes, I did in fact hear from her, my princess. Unfortunately, it appears she’s been slightly corrupted by the madness of Hell, as she was spouting absolute nonsense. She said something about that miner there actually being a high-level God who has been hiding his ability to fire a Wave Motion Blast with his shovel. I currently have her locked up for a bit.”

“Yeah, unbelievable, right?” Catria nodded.

Zeleburg’s was the appropriate reaction, after all. And though part of Elise’s testimony was true, part of it was false, and it was all nonetheless absurd. Catria continued to sympathize with the imposter princess.

“Either way, a pathetic human like yourself mustn’t be allowed anywhere near my beloved princess.”

“Unfortunately for you, Alan isn’t human. And for that matter, neither is the princess,” Catria muttered, but Zeleburg didn’t hear her.

Alan gripped his shovel while Zeleburg continued to laugh high above them.

“Ha ha ha! As if I’d ever square off against a lowly human. My underlings shall play with you instead.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Did I not inform the princess herself? My underlings and guardians of the orbs, the Tetrad Archfiends!”

Ah, right, but they’re not— But Alan didn’t have the chance to speak up.

Zeleburg waved his cape and began to chant. “Answer my call, Undead King, Alice Veknar!”

Space itself morphed, and two girls sitting at a low dining table appeared in the field.

“What?”

One of them was a silver-haired young girl. In other words, Alice. She sat at a table with a pen in hand, her face pale.

“Nnngh, once I finish up the illustrations from the assault on Rahzelfo I’ll be done with today’s quota... Gosh, these backgrounds are way too detailed!”

Alice’s feet were currently being massaged by an elf girl whose breasts swayed as she worked—in other words, Fio, who had been left back at the World Tree Castle. The two of them were the picture of domestic tranquility.



Zeleburg could only watch on with his mouth agape.

“Hrm... I’m going to need more assistants...” Alice said, then startled. “Ehhh?! Alan?!”

“Glad you’re doing well, Alice.”

“Why are we here? Did we get teleported?”

Zeleburg silently waved his cape again. Alice and Fio disappeared instantaneously, and Zeleburg ran his hand through his hair. “That—that was just the prologue.”

“The what now?”

“I most certainly did not screw up the summoning process. The next time will be the real deal.”

Zeleburg sure did have a lot of bravado.

Ah, this will be perfectly fine, then. Catria felt relieved by this revelation.

However, a mere five minutes later, Catria would regret every last one of her words and deeds. In no way was anything at all perfectly fine.

Part 60:

The Princess Uses the Orbs to Grant Her Wish (Part B)

“I DON'T NEED Alice Veknar! for this. Come, Legendary Despair-Eating Dragon of the Desert, Itangast!”

KABOOM!

A giant bronzed statue fell from the sky. Yes, a copper statue, one that had been built in the Rahal Tribe's village when Lithisia first began her religious crusade in the Desert Nation. It took the form of Alan piercing the heart of the dragon with his Wave Motion Shovel Blast. This statue had been built using the fangs of the real legendary dragon, which was why the statue had been summoned.

For several seconds, Zeleburg gazed at the colossal piece of art.

“No... actually, uh, *this* was the prologue.” He was surprisingly resilient to the irrational. Zeleburg waved his hand again and the statue vanished. “Heed my call, Emperor of the Skies, Pazuzu!”

Silence. Nothing at all happened. As you recall, Alan had utterly annihilated both Pazuzu and the floating city of Rahzelfo.

At this point, sweat finally started to drizzle down Zeleburg's forehead. He was at last starting to understand his predicament. “Wh-what's going on?!”

“I've already defeated your four archfiends or whatever.”

“Impossible! Madness! Heed my call, Lord of the Seas, Lernia Hydra!”

Silence. Nothing happened this time as well, or at least so everyone present thought until a girl suddenly appeared. She had wavy hair that stretched down to her hips, and she wore pajamas. A big pillow was stuffed between her legs as well.

“Alan... When are you gonna...come back...” She seemed out of breath.

Lucrezia lay on her bed, moving about. She appeared to be having quite the restless dream.

“Huh?” The young woman blinked rapidly.

Catria couldn't put together why she'd been summoned.

Frankly, this one probably happened because Lucrezia had eaten the greatest amount of Lernia Hydra-tentacle sashimi at the banquet on their day of celebration after defeating it. Of course, none of that actually mattered. All that mattered was her absurd position.

It was suggestive, to say the least.

“EEEEEEEEK?! Alan?! Why, why, why?!” Lucrezia's face was bright red as she screamed.

Zeleburg snapped his fingers and Lucrezia vanished. The prime minister no longer wore a smile. Instead, sweat poured down his face in a waterfall.

“What's the meaning of this?!?!”

Catria was relieved to discover that even a greater demon couldn't fully understand the shovel.

“That's how we got the orbs back. We defeated your Tetrad Archfiends.”

“Impossible!”

“Lithisia, show him.”

There was no reason to keep them hidden anymore, as Lithisia had the orbs in her possession. She took out her red shovel and showed it to the prime minister. Lining its handle were seven glowing orbs reflecting the light of the sun.

“Er, were they always that size?” Alan asked.

The orbs were supposed to be about as large as the palm of one's hand, yet these were about the size of a diamond one might find in a ring.

Lithisia smiled. “We modified them so that they'd fit in Sir Miner's shovel.”

They modified a national treasure? Catria thought.

Zeleburg's expression was that of pure astonishment. “NNNGH?!”

Yup. Catria sighed. This war and this journey are over. Though I suppose we could've just brought Alan here and that would've been more than enough to end things—

However, for some reason, Zeleburg began to smugly laugh. “Mwa ha ha... Mwa ha ha ha ha.”

“Hrm?”

“Shovel?”

“You’ve collected all seven orbs, have you?” The laughter soon morphed into something of a cackle as Zeleburg’s voice echoed through the heavens. “Ha ha ha ha ha ha! As expected from the princess herself! You’ve surpassed my wildest expectations!”

“Shovel? Zeleburg, have you finally lost your mind?”

She’s the last person I’d wanna hear that from, thought Catria.

But Zeleburg wasn’t looking at Alan anymore. He was staring at Lithisia. “Your Highness, do you know why I scattered the orbs to the various nations you fled to?”

“Scoopey! (No clue!)”

“Scoopey?! Er, anyway, I made you collect the orbs on purpose.”

“Scoopey! (That’s a lie! I did this all of my own free will!)”

“...”

Despite Zeleburg’s high resilience to the unreasonable, even he couldn’t help but go silent. But he soon shook his head and regained his composure. “The power of the orbs... You see, they don’t just seal away monsters and demons, they do something much more incredible.”

“Shoop.”

“Shoop?!”

What the hell does that even mean?! This was the translation of the silent scream in Catria’s heart.

“She probably combined ‘shovel’ and ‘scoop,’ ultimately meaning ‘I don’t

understand,’” said Alan.

“I...see. Looks like yet another unnecessary word has been introduced into humanity’s lexicon...”

Meanwhile, Zeleburg continued. “Th-the orbs have the power to grant wishes. But Your Highness, your wish was not granted. That’s because I cast a spell on the first orb, the Yellow Orb, so you wouldn’t be able to make your wish as you are now.”

“Hm?” Alan’s eyebrows twitched. “I knew I sensed something odd.”

That would explain why Lithisia’s wish hadn’t been granted.

“Exactly! I scattered the orbs across the land so they could absorb the wishing power of people all around the world, thus making it possible to create an even more powerful miracle! Now, at last, all seven orbs have returned to me! Thanks to your hard work, Your Highness!” Zeleburg cackled. “Ha ha ha ha ha! Your Highness, you’ve been dancing in the palm of my hand this entire time!”

I’d personally call it shoveling, not dancing, thought Catria.

“The orbs had that kind of shovel?” Lithisia looked down at the gems in the handle of her shovel with great curiosity. As she did—

SHIIIIIIIIINE!

A beam of seven colors erupted from the red shovel she held.

“EEEK!”

“It’s begun. The orbs are responding to my wish.” Zeleburg proceeded to make some kind of complex hand motion, causing the orbs to shine even more radiantly. An overwhelming amount of light now projected from Lithisia’s red shovel. “As they are now, thanks to my spell, the orbs can only grant a wish of extreme desire and greed. Too much greed for any single human.”

“A greed too great for a human?” Catria felt a chill race down her spine.

“Precisely! In other words, it can only be used by one such as myself—a demon of true power!”

But Catria had stopped listening. A level of desire and greed no human could

hold. *Wait, no. That means... Isn't this like, super bad?*

RUUUUUMBBBBLLLLLEEEEE!

The multicolored beam of light being fired from the orbs surrounded and engulfed not Zeleburg, but Lithisia.

“Wha?” Zeleburg couldn’t keep himself from sounding like a total fool.

This wasn’t his fault, considering he had no idea what was happening. The only people who did were Alan and Catria.

“Alan!”

“I know.”

The miner had moved before the knight’s warning. He gripped his shovel, aimed for Lithisia’s red one, and thrust. The fierce clang of metal colliding with metal rang through the air as Lithisia’s shovel was slammed to the ground.

Except it wasn’t. Lithisia continued to grip her shovel as if nothing had happened.

“?!”

Catria was stunned. Alan’s shovel wasn’t strong enough to stop her?!

Meanwhile, the princess continued to gaze at her shovel, entranced.

“Lithisia!!!” Alan yelled out to her.

She twitched ever so slightly in response. “Sh...”

For but a moment, it appeared as though Lithisia had regained composure. Her eyes moist, she looked like she wanted to say something. Then it was done. Lithisia clutched her red shovel close to her chest.

“...”

Catria couldn’t hear what her mistress had to say. The light coming from the orbs embedded in Lithisia’s shovel began to swallow her expression and then her entire body, soon enveloping the entire area. It wasn’t any kind of normal light; Catria sensed an overwhelming pressure pushing down on her from within it.

This light was washing over the world.

What is this?

Then they heard something within the light—something like a hymn. It sort of sounded like Lithisia’s voice, but not quite. This mysterious voice rang out from within the radiance.

“Sho-vel! A-lan! Sho-vel! A-lan!”

“Seriously?! We’re still dealing with shovels even now?!” Catria only managed to maintain her sense of self by playing the straight woman.

The situation remained unchanged. Something tremendous was going down, but Catria had no clue what that something was beyond it being extremely shovel. She stabbed her Holy Knight Blade into the ground and shouted, “Alan, do something!”

The miner didn’t move when faced with Lithisia’s light. He held his shovel above his head.

“This is ‘World Modification.’ I don’t know if this is gonna work or not, but... FILL!” cried Alan.

KA-CHOOOOOOOOM!

Giant brown walls jutted up from the ground surrounding Lithisia, Alan, and Catria, piercing the heavens themselves. It looked as though Lithisia’s light was being sealed within said walls—but the strange voice and white light continued to erupt from the princess.

Alan turned back to Catria with shovel in hand and an extremely grave expression on his face. “Catria, I can’t do this alone. I need your help.”

“Wha?!”

“The Lithisia before us is on a different level. She’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” Alan said. Catria swallowed her breath as Alan made his grim declaration: “She’s a scoop.”

Seconds passed and the light appeared to have ceased.

Catria finally resumed her role as the straight woman. “Could you at least *try* and explain yourself for once?!”

Exhausted, she drooped. She figured that the next time she opened her eyes, everything would probably have become shoops or something. Whatever the hell that meant.

Part 61:

The Princess Introduces Herself as a Scoop

WHEN CATRIA WOKE, the world had remade itself as a Shovel Hell.

“Really?”

That was the only way to describe it.

Catria recalled losing consciousness due to the orbs’ light, but she was no longer in a field near the Rostir capital. In fact, it could hardly be described as a field, considering the lack of plant life. Instead, billions of tiny shovels poked out of the ground. As they swayed back and forth in the wind, she could hear them going “shooovel... shooovel...”

“The laws of space are being contorted.”

But that was pretty common, so Catria scanned her surroundings. Where Lancelot and the Holy Shovel Knights had once stood was a hill, covered with countless shovels stuck in the ground. These shovels were as silver as the Holy Knights’ armor had been.

In other words, those shovels were what the knights had become. That meant the shovel wearing a black cape in front of Catria was probably Zeleburg.

Oh, I get it.

“Wait, what am I talking about?!” Catria gazed up at the sky as she bantered with herself.

As luck would have it, the sky was even more screwed up than the field. The sun still, uh, remained. But a giant shovel impaled it. Just how big did that thing have to be to do something like that?

The sun burned fiercely like a star approaching the end of its life, almost as though it’d burn away everything in this Shovel Hell.

After taking in her surroundings, Catria could handle it no longer and yelled. “Alan! Where are you?!”

She was half in tears. Quite frankly, she was scared, shaken to her core.

“Alan, don’t you dare leave me all alone in this damned Shovel Hell!” Catria was more than certain that she’d lose her mind if left alone in this world for more than three minutes. “Dammit! What were you thinking, Lithisia?!”

Zeleburg had said the orbs could only grant a wish of extreme desire and greed, one that no human could possibly make. He was exactly right. The only being capable of wishing for a world like this was Princess Lithisia, or perhaps, Princess Shovelthisia.

And where exactly had that princess gone? Was she one of the billions of shovels poking out of the ground? If she was, how was Catria to find her? And what would doing that even solve?

Argh, I just don’t get it! This is too much for one single human!

“I see you’re awake, Catria.”

The knight heard someone approaching her from behind. She turned to find a familiarly dressed princess.

“Your Highness?! ...No.” Catria peered at the golden-haired girl and the perfect way she held herself. “Elise, huh?”

She must’ve made it through thanks to the lingering shreds of the Anti-Shovel Power treatment she received in Shoveland.

“Hrm, so you survived too.” Elise folded her arms and looked up at the sun impaled by a shovel. Her lips formed a fearless smile. “Catria, look at that. I’m sure you’ve noticed what’s wrong, yes?”

“If you’re talking about the bajillion shovels around us, then yeah.”

“This is World Modification. Something only a high-level being—a God-class entity—can do.”

All right. Okay. So the field of billions of shovels was apparently the work of a god. Great.

Elise wore a victorious expression. “Take a look at the giant shovel impaling the sun. Alan... This would mean that he’s surpassed the God-class entities of the Sun Pantheon. I’ll call him a Zero-Class entity for now. You see, the other

gods would never simply allow this to transpire, if they had a choice.”

Shovel, shovel.

The shovels surrounding Elise swayed to and fro.

“Haaah...” Catria sighed. *This poor girl has no idea what she’s talking about.*

“You seem to have missed this, but this isn’t Alan’s doing,” said Catria. “It’s the princess’s.”

“It’s all the same. Is she not one of his lesser gods? She’s clearly neither human nor angel.”

“Well, that’s true.” It was hard for Catria to outright contradict Elise when part of what she said was in fact the case.

“But this is also the perfect chance!” Elise cried.

“For what?”

“This time, I won’t be interrupted during the important bits like at that theme park.” Elise was likely referring to the Shovelcom incident.

“What’s your point?”

“This is proof that he doesn’t have full control of his power.” Elise smirked. “This happened because his power’s been scattered across the world. Basically, you could say he’s been weakened. Right now, while his Zero-Class power is divided, I, the Demon of Reflection, might be able to copy him! Hee hee hee!”

Elise trembled, but not due to fear; she vibrated with pure excitement. “I had planned to copy the Demogorgon’s power, but now? Hee hee... I never thought the opportunity would present itself so quickly.”

“Stop it, seriously.” Catria’s warning was for real. If Elise continued down this path, Catria could see naught but a future in which Elise became a shovel. “Oh, and I know I’m repeating myself, but Alan isn’t a god.”

Catria knew the warning was pointless at this point, but it had to be made.

Elise regarded Catria for a time before curling her lips into a smile. “If that *thing* is truly just a human, then you should flee as soon as possible.”

“Pardon?”

“Remember what I said before? There’s no way the Sun God would permit such an atrocity.” Elise pointed at the currently impaled sun and smiled gleefully. “If a mere mortal has made fool of the sun, divine punishment will soon come.”

She wasn’t wrong. If the Pantheon of the Sun had anything to say about this, a big old serving of retribution was no doubt on the way.

“Eh, but given it’s Alan, I’m not sure that really matters,” said Catria.

Elise spun around like she was dancing and turned her back to Catria. She glanced over her shoulder and winked as she walked away. “Catch you later, Catria. Let us meet again, next time in a world that I rule—sha?!”

Thunk!

Elise had tripped on one of the field shovels because she wasn’t looking where she was walking. She tumbled forward and smacked her forehead on another one of the shovels. It looked like it hurt a lot.

“Gaaaaaaaah?!” Elise sat on her knees in agony.

“A-are you okay?”

“Th-this is nothing... Nothing!” Elise rubbed her forehead and disappeared. She likely intended to search for Lithisia and Alan.

“She’s nothing more than another victim of the shovel,” Catria sighed. But that didn’t mean Catria could do anything to help her.

Shoooooovel! This was the sound of the wind blowing through the open cavity of a shovel handle. Catria had been left all on her own.

“I...guess I’ll look for Alan too.”

In a way, Elise’s presence had helped calm Catria down. The thought of searching through a billion some-odd shovels made her want to pass out, but the fact that she and Elise were still okay meant that Alan might also still have his human form. Either way, nothing could be saved until Catria reunited with him.

She began to walk, walk and walk, until she came across a landmark.

“Wait, that’s...”

A shovel hill. A single large shovel had been stabbed into its very top. It looked much like the shovel Alan always carried around. The lady knight felt a chill run down the length of her body.

“No, that’s impossible. Not him of all people!” Deeply unsettled, Catria quickly closed in on the shovel.

It was stabbed into the ground almost like a tombstone of sorts, and unfortunately, it was most definitely Alan’s shovel. But that wasn’t all; something was actually buried in the ground.

Catria trembled with despair. Buried there was Alan’s head.

“?!”

His head was the only thing poking out from the dirt. Alan’s expression was peaceful, almost as if he were sleeping under the watchful eye of the shovel.

No, this can’t be! Alan can’t be dead! Catria fell to her knees and reached out to his head with trembling hands.

Woop.

The Alan head casually opened its eyes. “Hrm, you’re finally awake, Catria?”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!”

And just like that, Alan emerged from the ground and wiped the ashen dirt off his body. “Hm, it’s been a while since I was last buried alive. Not since the battle against the Demogorgon.”

Alan’s whole body was present and accounted for. He was alive, like any normal person. Once Catria fully realized this, she broke into sobs as she thumped Alan on the chest with her hands. *You big, dumb, stupid, dummy!*

“Enough with the crappy jokes, you big jerk!” she cried.

“Hey, don’t hold me like that. I’m covered in dirt.”

To be fair, from Catria’s point of view, he had been a total goner. Though relieved, she still had a runny nose.

“Why are you crying?”

“Cuz you were acting all dead! What the hell were you thinking?!” Catria yelled as she fought back her tears. *I mean, I’m glad he’s alive! I am! I am, but, argh! I’m going to get him for tricking me like this!*

“Ah, you mean me being buried? I wasn’t pretending to be dead.” Alan casually pulled his shovel out from the dirt, and for a moment, it looked like it was glowing light blue. “By burying myself in the ground, I charged my Shovel Power.”

“None of those words make any sense!”

“I was preparing for a battle with a fierce enemy.”

“Jeez, you’re such a dummy!”

Despite the tears in her eyes, Catria smiled; she really was happy that this was the same old Alan, so much so that she let out a sigh of relief.

As Alan gently ran his hand across Catria’s head, his expression grew serious. “Catria, this is going to be one hell of a fight. I’m going to need your strength (shovel).”

“You think I didn’t hear ‘shovel,’ but I totally did!”

“I might not be able to handle this alone. It’s possible that the orbs have taken a significant portion of my power.”

Alan gripped his shovel. His whole body projected a light blue Shovel Aura, but it wasn’t nearly as fierce as before. Perhaps Elise had been right when she said his power had been scattered.

“Before you woke up, I was gathering the Shovel Power that’s been strewn across the globe, but...”

Alan gazed past Catria. She turned, only to find a castle in the distance, one that sat where Rostir Castle should’ve been. However, something was clearly different about it. It was a steel tower that nearly pierced the heavens—in the shape of a shovel, no less. There could be no doubt about the identity of the one who waited within those walls.

“I don’t know if I can save Lithisia all by myself,” Alan said, looking grave.

“I...see...” Catria wasn’t really sure what she “saw,” but she chuckled and

gripped the Holy Knight Blade on her back. Alan was asking for her help. The invincible Alan, asking a fallen knight such as herself. In that case, there was but one answer. “I understand. Leave it to me. What do you need me to do?”

“Help me maintain my sanity.”

“Excuse me?”

“If I spoke to Lithisia as she is now, even I might get corrupted.”

“Even you...? I’m not sure I can help if it’s really that bad.”

Alan shook his head. “Whenever you play the straight woman, it helps me stay calm.”

“That’s my role?!”

Catria had thought Alan was leaving her to guard his back, but instead he wanted the stupidest favor imaginable. That said, Catria had already agreed to help, so there was no turning back.

“We must hurry, Catria. If we take too much time, things’ll only get worse.”

“How is that even possible at this point?”

“Currently, this Shovel Hell is limited to only Rostir. What we should worry about resides elsewhere.” Alan pointed to the impaled sun up above. “That’s the real sun, and it’s currently being blatantly desecrated by the shovel.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

“If the Sun God notices, there’ll be a new kind of hell to pay.”

“Elise said as much earlier...”

Divine retribution. Now that Catria thought about it, didn’t Lucy and Gabriella serve the Sun God? Alan had said something about how if he ever had to face a greater God-class entity, his chances of winning were slim. Of course, the fact that they were slim and not nonexistent was ridiculous in and of itself.

“I asked Lucy and Gabriella to try and keep the Sun God busy for now,” Alan said. At this point, it seemed safe to say that the two of them were proper Shovel Angels now. “I don’t know how long they’ll be able to hold out. We must hurry.”

Alan dug his feet into the Shovel Ground (it was hard) and began to walk quickly. Their objective was the former capital of Rostir, now known as the capital of Shovelir, and the Ashen Shopalace, where they would once more face Lithisia.

“Alan, what are you planning on saying to the princess?”

“I don’t know.” The one dude in the world who was impossible to understand was saying that he didn’t know something. “I still don’t understand what Lithisia wants from me—or any of this.”

It was true that no mortal could possibly understand any of what Lithisia was thinking, but one thing was clear as day to Catria, at least: Lithisia loved Alan.

“That’s why the first thing I need to do is listen to her demands and go from there. I may not know what she’s after, but I’ll do everything within my power to give it to her,” Alan whispered to himself as he stared off toward the shining Shopalace. He seemed calm, but his underlying anxieties slipped through the cracks.

Catria could tell he cared a great deal about Lithisia, and she couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of the princess.

Alan turned to Catria. “Do you know what she wants?”

Catria struggled with this question for a moment. In the end, she chose honesty. “Doesn’t she want to marry you?”

Seriously, just marry her already.

“If that’s what she truly desires, I wouldn’t object,” Alan replied.

“Seriously?”

“But that can’t be the only thing she’s after. Her request has to be something beyond the understanding of humanity.”

“You might be right...”

The wish the orbs granted...what could it have been?

Lithisia’s feelings for Alan were supposed to be like that of a young maiden’s, but when Catria looked at the sun impaled by a shovel, or the Shopalace, or the

field of shovels, she wasn't so confident in that assessment. Rostir had transformed into a Shovel Hell, befitting the name Shovelir. A nation for shovels, not humans, composed of a billion small shovels. No matter how you looked at it, this wasn't the work of a young maiden in love. Nor was it the work of a god, despite what Elise thought. If anything—

“We might end up doing battle with the princess...”

It was the work of a lord of Hell.

The Shopalace was in fact much closer than they had realized. Rostir Castle should've been multiple miles away, but they arrived at the new castle after traveling only a few feet.

The distance had probably been filled in by shovels.

“Looks like Lithisia is here.”

The shovel-shaped castle, as large as a mountain, was constructed entirely of shovels. From afar, it appeared to be a tower made from all kinds of rubble, but up close, that rubble actually consisted of countless small shovels. It was an incredibly uncomfortable sight.

“It's so dang hard to walk!”

“Let's hurry. Lucy and Gabriella will only be able to hold the Sun God's attention for so long.”

“What happens if they notice us?”

“It's possible that Rostir—no, the entire continent—will get roasted.”

“Isn't that going overboard?!”

“That's how gods are.”

And just like that, Catria shouldered the fate of the continent. As a knight, this was all terribly exciting, but she couldn't find it in herself to laugh or smile. After all, she'd soon be directing the tip of her blade at her beloved (at least when she was human) mistress.

Catria swallowed as her body quaked with nervous energy. What form had

Lithisia taken while waiting for them?

“This is it.”

The pair stood in front of a towering door to the throne room (the door was also made out of a bunch of shovels). The sign on said door had a message written in familiar feminine handwriting.

“Here lies the Great Demon King, Sho Ve Lithisia”

Shoveevevelevel...

(The sound of Catria’s anxiety being instantaneously washed away.)

“What the hell are you thinking, Your Highness?” Catria sighed, though she at least understood that it was nothing good.

“We’re going in, Catria.”

Shoshoshosho...

Alan opened the large door and an extremely stupid sound filled the air. This was the throne room Zeleburg had once taken over for himself. In the center of it was a young woman in a princess dress. Her left hand held a shovel, while her right hand also held a shovel. She had a shovel in her mouth and was using shovels as stilts. She was simultaneously wielding five shovels, and her eyes were hidden behind a mask. A mask shaped like the head of a shovel. Actually, it was just a shovel head. Above her head, all seven orbs floated in midair. They formed a beautiful shovel (four orbs for the handle, three orbs for the head).

She was completely a shovel. Or was she a scoop at this point? Did it really matter?

“W-welcommemefe, pperrf. Th-thiffgf haf?!” Because of the shovel in her mouth, she couldn’t speak properly. Said mouth-shovel fell to the floor, causing the self-proclaimed Great Demon King Sho Ve Lithisia to panic and try to pick it up. She attempted to sho-ffle over to it, but in doing so she slipped, causing the shovels in her hands and her mask to fall off as well.

Her face was plain for all to see.

“What the hell are you thinking, Your Highness?” said Catria, which was the second time she had said this in thirty seconds.

“Shoooooooo?!” Lithisia was stunned that her identity had been discovered, not that anyone had ever actually questioned who she was. The only princess dumb enough to do this in the history of the entire continent was Lithisia, and there was no way this idiot was that unfortunate soul, Elise of the Reflection. “I-I’m no cute and pure Shovel Princess, shovel!”

She was already falling apart.

“The shovel at the end of your sentence kinda gives you away, to be honest.”

“Sho?! I mean, uh, er, scoop!” Lithisia cleared her throat before continuing. “I-I’m the Great Demon King, Sho Ve Lithisia! I will fill this world with shovels, scoop!”

“This hurts to listen to.”

“Scoop, I said!” Lithisia insisted with tears in her eyes.

Catria no longer knew what to do.

Then the silent Alan finally moved. He gripped his shovel. “Lithisia, right now, you really are a scoop.”

“!!!”

With a super happy smile on her face, she nodded enthusiastically.

Catria no longer had the energy to interject, so she just gazed out the window. The impaled sun still burned brightly.

Ah, jeez. Maybe it’s for the best if you just burn this whole world to a crisp, Sun God.

Part 62:

The Princess Has the Miner Tend to Her Every Need

IT WAS IN THE Great Shovel Temple, in the Hall of Prayer—formerly known as Rostir Castle’s throne room—where the self-proclaimed scoop (Princess Lithisia), lost to Alan in two seconds flat.

“Shovel?!”

“What did you even want to do with all this, Your Highness?” Catria sighed.

Truth be told, it wasn’t even a fight. If one were to precisely lay out what Catria witnessed: Lithisia attempted to assault Alan but tripped and ended up in a princess carry, which was, surprise surprise, the end of her attack. The second Alan touched Lithisia, all the power to resist seemed to evacuate her body.

At the end of the day, she just loved that miner way too much. Yet she had still tried to attack him. Why?

“Haaaaaaauuuuhhh, you’re too kind, Sir Miner...” Lithisia cried as she looked up at him. “Sir Miner, pl-please... Defeat me with your shovel.”

“Come now. I’m going to protect you.”

“Huh?”

“From the beginning to the very end, I’ll always be on your side.”

“Ah...” Lithisia turned bright red with joy despite wanting to protest that this wasn’t the point.

But Alan continued to hold her in his arms and looked her straight in the eyes. “So please, tell me. Why did you do something as scoopy as this?”

“Scoopy” apparently meant “messed up” or “wrong.” You know, like the Shovel Hell they were currently trapped in.

Despite a profound headache, Catria understood it all. She had to painstakingly translate each bit of their conversation, and at this point she was ready to consider that their conversation might be way more messed up than

the world's present situation.

"Mmf..."

For a moment, Lithisia's lids lowered as she avoided Alan's gaze. Her lips began to part. Then she balled up in his arms. She couldn't say it. This was the one thing she couldn't reveal. Her resolve was rock solid.

But we have to hurry... On Alan's end, he couldn't afford to retreat. The Shovel Hellification of the world was still in motion. Even as they spoke in this former-palace, there was no telling when the Sun God's retaliation would rain down upon them. He wasn't worried about himself, but Catria and Lithisia would be in real danger.

Alan held up his adamantite shovel and spoke with great intent. "There's no time to waste. Lithisia, I'm going to dig up your true intentions."

"Sho?!?!?!!" The princess panicked as a scoop or shovel might. *No, anything but that! He'll know how I feel!*

She could try and resist, but that was always a pointless endeavor in the face of Alan. He would uncover it all. Tears emerged from her eyes, shovel-shaped tears.

He'll find out! Sir Miner will find out the feelings in my scoopy heart and soul...

"Is having your heart uncovered embarrassing, Lithisia?"

"Sh..." Lithisia tearfully nodded.

Alan nodded in return and thought for a moment. "Then how about you dig up my true intentions too?" the miner declared shovelly.

Lithisia couldn't mask her surprise.

Meanwhile, Catria stared blankly into the distance. *Can I stop interjecting now?*

"We'll reveal our hearts to one another. No one-sided digging. Just as I uncover your true feelings, you uncover mine. We'll unearth them together. Maybe that way..." Alan handed Lithisia her red shovel and smiled. "You won't have to be so embarrassed."

That logic makes no sense. A few seconds passed during which Catria really seriously considered interjecting. But when she saw how Lithisia gazed at Alan like a girl falling in love for the second time, she decided to hold her tongue. A relationship in which the two would uncover each other's hearts... Wasn't that even deeper than just being lovers?

No, seriously. Just get married already, what the hell!

Catria still kept her opinion to herself. She was a good girl who could read the room.

"Then let's begin. Shoveling Heart!"

When Alan gripped his shovel, a sandpit appeared in the room, in the middle of which rose a single sand mountain, the likes of which a child might make. Lithisia and Alan sat on opposite sides of it. On the side of the mountain in front of Alan was the name "Lithisia." In front of Lithisia was "Alan."

Ah... Lithisia trembled and closed her eyes, but she would resist no more. She would do as Alan said. It was clear that she had come to terms with her fate.

Catria, meanwhile, had entirely abandoned her role as the straight woman.

At last, Alan began to dig into Lithisia's sand mountain. From it bellowed smoke in the form of a human: a transparent Lithisia holding a shovel like a baby.

The form spoke. *"I've committed a horrible scoop..."*

"?!?!?!"

Er, what? Catria had already lost the thread. But judging by Lithisia's terrified expression, she must've meant "committed a horrible sin."

The voice continued. *"I thought I tried my best. I really, really did. I know I'm no shovel. I'm just a regular human. But...I practiced shoveling and tried my hardest to become a shovel. I did it all...I did it all so I could have Sir Miner shovel (verb) me."*

Catria thought to look for earplugs but resisted the urge. These were undeniably Lithisia's true feelings. *This is my mistress. I have to understand her true intentions.*

The voice continued. *“And because I worked really hard, Sir Miner praised me. He said that I was a very shovelly girl. I was so happy. So very, very happy. An ordinary human like me could be a shovel if I tried my hardest. But—”*

The voice stopped for a moment.

“I was wrong. I was mistaken from the very beginning. After all, Sir Miner...”

The voice stopped again.

“He didn’t want a shovelly girl, he wanted a normal girl.”

Catria instinctively looked at Alan, who regarded Lithisia with utmost seriousness. In contrast, tears cascaded down Lithisia’s cheeks.

You’re really calling Kuronono normal? She’s way too shovel for that, Catria interjected in her heart, but the voice continued anyway.

“I can never be normal again. Sir Miner acknowledged that both my body and mind are shovels now. That’s why I was just so jealous of Kuronono for being a normal girl. So jealous. I didn’t know what to do with myself. But at that moment, I learned the orbs might grant my selfish wish—the sort of wish a human might never make, but that I, a shovel... And if everyone were to become shovels too, I would be normal again. So I wished for it.”

Both the projected Lithisia and the real one sobbed like a small child.

“I’m the one who wished for this Hell. I’m an evil shovel. An evil scoop. I’m the Great Demon King Scoop who deserves to be vanquished and banished from this world. That’s why, Sir Miner, I have one last request of you. Take me, a completely irredeemable scoop...”

The projected Lithisia opened her eyes wide and stared straight at Alan as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

“And shovel (term not appropriate for broadcast) me, please.”

The projection cut out there, and silence washed over the room. All that remained was the sound of Lithisia crying.

Alan sank deep into thought.

Catria had hit the limit on her patience after seeing Lithisia’s “true intentions”

laid bare. She could no longer hold back.

“Your Highness.” There was so, so much she wanted to say, but first, she wanted to interject about the most important misunderstanding of all. “When did you hear from Alan that he likes ‘normal’ girls?”

It was clear that this belief was the origin of all the drama. Catria sensed something really off about it. Sure, Princess Lithisia was always kind of off, but this seemed especially contorted.

“I mean, Sir Miner said that Kuroonono was perfect for him.”

“Perfect for him how?”

“Ah, I never did tell you, Catria. When I first started this journey with Lithisia, she made me a promise,” Alan said.

Alan and Lithisia made eye contact and nodded to one another, then spoke in tandem.

“She promised to help me find a successor.”

“I promised to birth his child.”

A full ten seconds passed.

Lithisia was the first to react.

“Shovel...?” Lithisia blinked rapidly with all of her strength.

“What are you talking about, Lithisia?” Alan said, bewildered. “You were going to help me search for a successor, weren’t you?”

“Shovel?! Um, er, you mean you want a child, right?!”

“Well, an apprentice. I was willing to take in an orphan too, I suppose.”

“?!?!?!?”

Lithisia’s eyes went from being shaped like shovels to being round like circles. They were the eyes of an extremely surprised human maiden.

“You’re a princess, so I thought it’d be easy for you to gather potential

apprentices among your citizens.”

“?!?!?”

Lithisia’s jaw was on the floor.

“But since Kuronono seemed fairly talented, I was thinking of making her my apprentice.”

“?!?!?!?!?!?”

Lithisia was so stunned that she was on the verge of losing consciousness.

“Um! W-wait just a second, Sir Miner!”

“Sure.”

Lithisia was so panicked that she even forgot to add shovel to the end of her sentence. “You mean you don’t want to do lewd things with Kuronono?!”

“Uh, that’d make me a criminal.” What an incredibly logical response.

“In other words, there was no point in coming up with names for our children?!”

“You did what?!” Catria groaned.

“If it was a boy, I’d name him ‘Shovel,’ and if it was a girl, ‘Wave Motion Shovel Blast’!”

In other words, names that would guarantee their status as enemies of humanity.

“Your naming sense is incredible, Lithisia,” Alan said.

“Ah, I’m h-honored, shovel... Wait, that’s not important right now!” Lithisia shook her head with all of her might, then stared up at Alan once more.

“Shovel?!”

Lithisia fought off a wave of confusion the likes of which she’d never felt before. The very concept she’d based everything in her life upon since the moment she met Alan was crumbling to pieces. She hadn’t expected this. She had planned to have Sir Miner’s children. She had done so much shoveling up until now for that very purpose. She had tried her utmost to become a Shovel Princess.

And yet Sir Miner had never intended any of that. She wanted to cry.

“AAAAAAUUUUUGHHHHH!” In fact, she bawled. She had to. She had finally realized that her mistake wasn’t just this Shovel Hell. From the very start of this journey, Lithisia’s love had been mistaken. She wanted to dig a hole and bury herself inside of it. She fell to the floor and hugged her knees.

“Lithisia,” Alan said. “I’m so sorry for making you misunderstand.”

“Sir Miner...?”

Alan looked truly apologetic as he frowned down at Lithisia. Sir Miner wasn’t scoopy; he was shovel, like always. But before she could say as much, he spoke again.

“I’m so sorry. I want to make this up to you. I have to take responsibility for my actions.”

“Huh???”

“I’m going to take responsibility, here and now.” Alan gripped his shovel like always. “I’m willing to do anything you ask of me.”

This was the same thing Lithisia had said to him at the start of their quest.

“?! ”

Lithisia unconsciously gripped her shovel. Anything. Alan’s version of “anything” was on a whole other level considering he really could do “anything.” Lithisia understood that all too well after all this time traveling together with him. Whether the feat was world domination or Shovel Space Travel, he could make it happen.

But that wasn’t what Lithisia wanted. She desired but a single thing.

“Ah...” Her mouth opened and closed, but her voice went unheard. She couldn’t speak; she hadn’t the courage. She didn’t think she had the right to ask this of him. Lithisia had been wrong about the promise they exchanged when they first met. She had been wrong to try to become a shovel. She had been jealous of Kuronono for no reason. She had been wrong about everything—truly a useless princess. How could she possibly stand next to Alan, who was a perfect shovel in every which way? It was time to give up.

But just as weakness took her heart, she saw the sharp tip of some shining thing.

“Wow...”

It was the head of Alan’s radiant shovel. Then Lithisia remembered the feeling of her lips against that metal head... The Shovel Kiss she exchanged with Alan.

Shovel. Love. An amazing kiss. Her mind filled with this memory. Lithisia’s heart and body were once more overwhelmed with shovels. She couldn’t imagine a future without Alan in her life.

“I...”

Be brave, she repeated to herself. I may have been scoopy, but even now, I can still be shovel.

“I want to...” Lithisia gripped the red shovel she had received from Alan. She was embarrassed, incredibly so.

But she wanted this. She wanted it with every fiber of her being. It was the one thing she wanted over all else, and she had stuck by Alan’s side for that very reason.

And so Lithisia dug out her heart’s desire and yelled it into the air. “I-I want you to have your shovel way with me and make me pregnant!”

Three seconds later, Catria, ignored on the sidelines, interjected in her soul. *Wait, Your Highness. You mean like, right now?!*

Part 63:

The Invincible Shovel

I-I SAID IT! I actually said it! Lithisia's heart raced a mile a minute.

Alan had said he would do anything she asked of him, and she had promptly asked him to "shovel" her.

It took all of two seconds for her to regret this. How vulgar. How perverted. She had actually told him straight to his face that she wanted to engage in baby-making.

But she couldn't correct herself. After all, she really did want this. Lithisia wanted to do every imaginable thing with Alan, and she could barely contain herself anymore. She knew this was unbecoming of a shovel and a young lady, but she could no longer stop herself. Thus, she stared straight at Alan and waited for an answer.

At length, he nodded. "I understand."

"I"

A wave of bliss washed over Lithisia.

"Lithisia, truth be told, I've barely understood anything you've said since our journey began. But even so, even if I can't understand your words, I can't help but want to do everything and anything for you. I want to give you everything you desire. Lithisia..." Alan stopped for a moment. Then, with an entirely focused expression on his face, he declared, "Because I love you."

"!!!"

Whoa! Catria jumped in surprise. This was a proper confession! A proper, human confession!

"If I'm being completely honest, I've always wanted to uncover everything there is to uncover about you."

"!!!"

The bombs kept dropping, though they were getting increasingly more shovel with each passing moment.

“I never know what you’re thinking. But that just means you’re like no other mining vein I’ve ever encountered. Why your sentences end with shovel, why you want to bear my child, I still don’t quite get any of it. But that’s why my desire is so strong. I want to dig into your entire being...” Alan embraced Lithisia tightly. “And I want to make everything about you mine. I can’t hold back this desire anymore.”

A few more seconds of silence went by. Lithisia was so moved that she simply quivered in place while gazing at Alan.

Meanwhile, Catria stared out a nearby window. *Do I really need to be here for this?*

“Sir Mi...ner...”

“I’m gonna have my way with you right now.”

Lithisia nodded. She wore her princess dress that placed great emphasis on her exquisite chest. Just as she was about to remove said article of clothing, she realized something. “Ah! Th-that’s right. We’re supposed to do this with our clothes on, right?”

“Hrm?”

“When I practiced shoveling for the first time, that’s what you said to me!”

It was an act she had simulated countless times in her mind. Now it was finally time to put that experience to use!

But Alan shook his head. “No, it’d probably be better if you took your dress off. It’ll probably get torn apart.”

What an absurd thing to say.

“Torn apart?!”

“I’m going to try and be as gentle as possible, but this is my first time as well. I don’t know how hard it’s going to get.”

“Ah... Ahhhh?!” Lithisia felt dizzy after hearing his rough description of the

act. But it didn't scare her. If anything... "I-if you want, you can be as r-rough as you want."

"Really?"

"Um, um, I!" Lithisia poked her fingers together in front of her lips. "I...I want to do all the things that you want...to do..."

Alan could do naught but nod after seeing the princess work up the courage to say as much. "Then we're doing it with clothes on."

"R-right!" Lithisia's cheeks were bright red with joy. *Um, um! Clothes on, and then uh, the location is important too!*

The only thing in the room was the throne.

"Um, do we, er, need a bed?" According to Lithisia's limited knowledge, a bed was a necessary object when it came to this sort of thing. She would have to grip the bed's white sheets as she tried her hardest to bear the overwhelming pleasure washing over her.

"A bed? Hrm, it'd break."

"It would?!"

"Like I said, it's my first time, so I don't know how hard to go."

Lithisia was amazed. Dizzily so. She was impressed that not only would Sir Miner rip her clothes apart, he'd destroy the bed as well!

But she had decided to accept his everything. That was why she gripped her red shovel and teleported a king-sized bed with white sheets into the throne room. This was the power of the seven orbs; they were still continuing to grant her heart's desires.

Alan nodded. "Now then, Lithisia. Sit on the bed for me."

"Um, o-okay! I'm sitting down now!"

"I want you to take up a position where you can best focus."

Lithisia nodded at the speed of light. *Focus. Focus on the moment. In other words, take up an appropriate position!*

Catria beheld Lithisia with her maiden circuits operating at full power and

sighed deeply. *I should make my exit and leave these two alone. Should I hang around outside for two or three hours? I mean, it's what my mistress desires, right? At this point, the two of them should just run off to the ends of space or some alternate dimension or something. Ah, but wait. What if divine punishment rains down while they're busy? I guess I'll just have to protect us, then. It's a knight's job to protect their mistress, not to tell her to "deal with it yourself."*

Just as Catria was about to turn her back on Alan and the princess, Alan stopped her. "Catria, where are you going?"

"Where? I mean, uh, the two of you should enjoy yourselves."

"No, you should watch us, Catria."

A moment passed.

"WHAAAAAA?!" Both Catria and Lithisia simultaneously screamed.

"Why so surprised? This'll be a good learning moment for you."

"Wait, wait, wait! How so?!"

This man had recommended something truly outrageous. Then Catria realized something and hugged her chest tightly. She closed her thighs together and did her best to hide her exposed skin from Alan's sight.

"Wait, d-don't tell me you're plan on doing me too?!"

"Hrm? No, not if you don't want me to."

"You mean you would if I asked?!"

"Of course."

Wait, wait, wait, that's rude to Lithisia! And I don't at all want that one bit, so why is my chest getting so tight?! Hold yourself together, Catria! What the hell are you thinking?! Catria was extremely confused.

Then Lithisia stepped in. "U-um, Catria? Please stay."

"Et tu, Your Highness?! Isn't this embarrassing?!"

"E-extremely so! But!" Lithisia held herself tightly as well. "It seems Sir Miner enjoys being...watched, so..."

Your Highness, you're taking your obedient maiden schtick a tad too far! But Catria didn't say this aloud. Something was off. This was supposed to be a private act between two lovers. Alan's interests clearly ran weird, but Catria didn't think he'd be the sort of guy into this kind of stuff—*Wait a second. Huh?*

Something really *was* out of place. *Would* Alan really be into this stuff? He had enough common sense to state that making love to Kuronono would make him a criminal. Right? When it came to things unrelated to shovels, Alan was a man with common sense.

Unlike the princess.

"I-I'm sitting down n-now..."

While Catria began to feel suspicious, things continued to progress elsewhere.

"Mm..." A position in which Lithisia could focus. In other words, a special pose. Lithisia placed her knees on the bed's sheets and laid back on a pillow. She raised her legs like one might in PE class. Her breasts swelled, and her tight white stockings accentuated her shapely thighs.

Holding up her stockings was a white garter belt, and beneath her skirt were her panties... They were pure-white, chosen so that she'd be ready to show them to Alan at the drop of a hat.



Lithisia trembled under Alan's gaze. It was terribly embarrassing, but she wanted him to look.

"Mmm, Sir Miner..." She hugged her chest, emphasizing her breasts. The two melon hills swayed. They were quite shapely. Every time she got into the bath, she washed them carefully to ensure they would be lovely to behold. Would Alan appreciate them?

Her heart raced and when she looked at Alan, he was holding his shovel, ready to go.

"Aaaah..." Lithisia was so incredibly happy. So thrilled. She closed her eyes. *He's going to do it. He's going to have his way with me!*

Then a single white feather floated in front of Alan.

"Alan! Alan! There's no more time!" Lucy, the Shovel Angel, appeared from a rip in space. She looked panicked as she flapped her wings. "You've been found out! There's no more time! You have to run!"

Catria unleashed a sigh of relief. It was unfortunate for the princess, but Lucy had excellent timing. Or so she thought.

"I can't do that," said Alan.

"Wha?!"

"Lithisia and I are going to make a child right now. I can't break my promise."

"Wh-what?! What are you saying?! The Sun God will be here in less than three minutes!"

"That's fine. I'll finish in one."

"One?!" Catria and Lithisia shouted simultaneously.

What madness! But considering he could build a whole palace in less than two hours, it didn't *not* make sense that he could (insert shovel that shouldn't be described out loud) in a minute.

Wait, what am I thinking? That's not the problem here! Catria held her head in her hands. "I-If you go that fast, you'll break the princess! She's only a maiden, as surprising as that may sound!"

Wait, no! That's not the issue either!

"Go?" Alan frowned. "There's no need for me to go anywhere."

"Pardon?"

"We don't have time for this. I'm starting." Alan held his shovel up above his head.

Wait! The billionth chill ran down Catria's spine. There was something definitely, definitely wrong about all of this. Why was Alan holding his adamantite shovel (literal)? How would he finish in a minute? Why did he want her to watch?

"I'm borrowing the power of the orbs, Lithisia. I have to make a miracle happen."

"A...miracle?"

"Exactly. A miracle I can't create with my power alone."

RUMBLE!

Light blue flames emerged from Alan's body, a flickering aura. It flared so hot that it seemed like space itself would burn away. In fact, the Shovel Hell surrounding him did indeed begin to burn away, its "ashes" being absorbed by Alan.

RUUUUUUMBLE!

His aura grew as space itself disintegrated. All this energy gathered above Alan's head in the shape of a shovel, a massive Shovel Aura that burned more fiercely than the sun.

Alan looked down at Lithisia sprawled out on the bed. This Shovel Princess, beyond Alan's understanding, was so lovely. He wanted to make all of her his, to take everything he had and give it to her. His feelings were unstoppable.

"LITHISIA!" Alan shouted as he focused all his desires into his shovel. "DIG!"

KA-CHOOOOOOOOOM!

The blast pierced both Lithisia and the world itself. The beam was just absurdly massive, engulfing the world in its entirety. The light blue energy even

absorbed the moon, the stars, the sun, and space itself. Alan continued to fire this energy from the tip of his shovel as its roar and blast of air filled the ex-throne room.

Space tore apart. The Shovel Hell that had swallowed the world was in turn swallowed by the light and instantly reverted to its original state.

But even then, the beam did not stop. With Lithisia at its center, it continued to fire from Alan's shovel. This was his super technique, the Wave Motion Shovel Blast.

"GAAAAAAAAAHHHH WHAT THE HELL, ALAAAAN?!?!?" Catria could hold herself back no more.

SHEEEEEEEEEEN!

Almost as if in resonance with Catria's feelings, a white light burst from the Sacred Scabbard Arcadia and obstructed the Wave Motion Shovel Blast. The Anti-Shovel Power managed to stop the Wave Motion Shovel Blast's light in its tracks.

"Hrm." Actually, it was more like Alan had stopped in his tracks. He was still in his Wave Motion Shovel Blast stance as he glanced at Catria. He had a look on his face that read like "Why did you get in my way?"

"You...you big...!" Just as Catria tried to play her role, Lithisia swooped in.

"Haaah, haaah, haaah, Sir Miner! What are you doing?!"

Right, the princess! She's okay? Catria spun, only to find that the princess had not vanished.

Her clothes and the bed had been damaged, yes, but not a single wound marred her beautiful skin. Her remaining clothing did its best to conceal her unmentionables, and her breasts heaved with her every breath. "Um, I, um, what did you do to me?!"

"Huh? I did what you asked. I had my way with you."

"What I asked? But..."

Shovel, shovel, shovel, shovel (the sound of a shovel clock ticking).

“Ah!”

SHOING (the sound Lithisia made when she came to an unfortunate realization).

“I-I get it! So that’s what this is, shovel!”

“What exactly is this, Your Highness?!”

“Things aren’t necessarily as they appear, Catria.”

“Excuse me, but for the sake of all of humanity, could you please explain?”

“Think about how you pronounce ‘Wave Motion Shovel Blast.’”

“Huh?”

What the hell is the princess talking about? Catria thought as she tried to wrap her head around this. *W A V E M O T I O N S H O V E L B L A S T*. *What’s the big—*

“?! ”

A chill. Again. Catria was dizzyed by the realization of the stupidest thing in the history of mankind. “No...way...”

The [Way]ve Motion Gun. The pronunciation.

“Ah...”

Catria was assaulted by the urge to flee.

“Ah...”

Catria took deep breaths to somehow maintain her sense of self, but she could not. She couldn’t suppress the urge building inside of her. Now that she understood the truth of things, she couldn’t resist the urge to interject.

“A-L-A-N!” And so the knight threw herself into the most intense interjection she’d made in her entire life. “W-H-Y DOES IT HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS?!”

“Why?” Alan asked, more to himself than anything.

Why *did* Lithisia want him to “have his way with her = Wave Motion Shovel Blast” and conceive a child? He had briefly considered that she might not be referring to his Wave Motion Shovel Blast but in fact something more adult, but

he had quickly rejected the idea.

Lithisia is a girl who goes beyond my understanding. Also, I'm too old for her.

There was no way Lithisia would ever want to do normal, if inappropriate things with him.

"I don't really know how to answer that question," Alan said. "But even so, I'm doing what I must."

Lithisia wanted a child via the Wave Motion Shovel Blast, so Alan agreed to it. No matter how absurd the princess's requests, Alan had long since committed to seeing them through. And so he would use the power of the orbs to create a miracle and rewrite the logic behind the creation of life itself.

But to what end? *Why?*

"Because I..." Alan gripped his shovel tightly and yelled out to the heavens. "I love you, Lithisia! Regardless of how shovel you are."

After a moment's pause, the width of the Wave Motion Shovel Blast multiplied. Alan's clothes exploded off of him. The heat of the glimmering Wave Motion Shovel Blast washed the world over with white.

Catria interjected with everything she had. "IF YOU LOVE HER, THEN JUST DO IT LIKE NORMAL!!!!"

She wasn't wrong.

"ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT TOO, YOUR HIGHNESS?!"

Lithisia twitched in response to Catria's tearful cries. *I... I...*

Needless to say, Catria was right. The princess and Alan had once again misunderstood one another. Lithisia wanted him to love her as he would any other woman. The human way. Was this alternative really acceptable? Was she okay with becoming pregnant with his Wave Motion Shovel Blast because of a misunderstanding like this? Going so far as to use the power of the orbs?

Wh-what do I really want? I...!

Lithisia didn't know. How could she? Alan said he didn't understand Lithisia's words, but it wasn't like she understood her own thoughts any better. Just as

she would never have been able to imagine who she would become in the days before she knew of the shovel, the current Lithisia couldn't imagine who she would be after conceiving via Wave Motion Shovel Blast.

She didn't want to think anymore. She just wanted to believe in Sir Miner and the shovel and give herself over to them. She wanted her Shovel Body and Shovel Spirit to be laid bare.

But was that really for the best? Was it truly all right for this misunderstanding to continue? Was it at all acceptable for him to go on without knowing that she wanted him in the truest sense? Was this really *okay*? Moving forward without clearing things up? Would that not be scoopy?

She wanted time to think. *I just want a little Shovel Time!*

Indeed, Lithisia *wished* for this. And as she did, the seven colored orbs shone fiercely, and their light was absorbed into Alan's shovel.

"Hrm, recharge complete."

The light of the Wave Motion Shovel Blast's light came together. His Shoveling Power Charge was at 120 percent. The safety was unlocked. No room for Anti-Shovel Barriers. All hands on Shovel Deck.

That's what the strange announcer's voice coming from Alan's shovel said.

Ah... Catria was certain it was all over. The princess would become pregnant via Wave Motion Shovel Blast and the world and humanity itself would come to an end. This tale of the self-proclaimed miner and self-proclaimed princess would meet its Shovel End.

Then, just as the Wave Motion Shovel Blast was fired once again—

"You've finally given me the chance to become you!"

Behind Lithisia, who had wished for just a little bit of time, Elise of the Reflection, whom everyone had forgotten about, teleported in.

Everything had gone according to Elise's plans. Or at least she seemed to think as much.

Hee hee, not bad, princess! To think you'd steal the power of the gods!

It was clear to Elise that Lithisia had taken at least a fraction of Alan's powers. The self-proclaimed miner's power had been scattered throughout the world, and none other than Princess Lithisia had once gathered it at the Shopalace. As far as Elise could tell, the princess had used the orbs to stage a coup against her master. She no doubt planned on taking her master's place, much like Elise did.

*It was the perfect opportunity. In other words, if Elise could become Lithisia—
I'll finally become a being who surpasses God-class entities!*

That being said, she couldn't just become Lithisia right away. If she tried to do it the easy way, she'd be blocked by that weird brainwashing like she had before. That experience had left Elise with numerous mental scars, including some truly perturbing thoughts about shovels.

That was why she had hidden in the curtains of the once-was throne room, quietly waiting for her moment to strike. She had known that eventually, Alan himself would come and do battle with Lithisia. That would be her chance.

And just as she theorized, it all came to pass. This brought her to the present moment.

You hesitated!

Up until now, Lithisia's incredible mental fortitude had protected her from Elise's machinations, but finally, she showed an opening.

Lithisia wasn't sure if she should take the full power of Alan's child-making Wave Motion Shovel Blast. In that moment, she was just a regular maiden. Both physically and mentally, she was weak. Seeing her in this vulnerable state, Elise's eyes sparkled more brightly than any orb.

"Lithisia, I will take everything from you!" Elise leapt from behind the curtain toward the princess, and there was nobody to stop her.

Why?

KA-CHOOOOOOOOOM!

"Huh...?"

Elise turned toward the light blue stream of light hurtling toward her.

The very special Wave Motion Shovel Blast landed a direct hit.

Part 64:

The Fake Princess Understands All

AMIDST THE RISING smoke and dust, Catria stood absolutely still. Shovel Hell was no more, but the sight before her was even worse.

Rostir, engulfed in the Wave Motion Shovel Blast, had been annihilated. All that remained was a mountain of rubble. The only other objects left were a sheet laid out on the ground and two nearly naked Lithisias sprawled out upon it.

Yup. Two princesses. One of them was even the real deal. She was staring blankly at the other Lithisia. Said other Lithisia was staring down at her own stomach.

“Huh?” She appeared to not comprehend a single thing that had just transpired.

This was the fake princess, Elise. Surrounding her were pieces of her dress that’d been blown off by Alan’s attack. Her skin was drenched with sweat, and her body was splashed with some kind of goop (probably residue from the Wave Motion Shovel Blast.) Her breasts heaved with each breath she took.

Something around Elise’s stomach shone. In fact, it looked a little swollen.

Lucy flapped her way over to the fake princess.

“Um, so...” She seemed unsure of what to say, but for the meantime she smiled. That was all she could do. And with dead eyes, she did her job as an angel. “Congratulations on your pregnancy!”

Thus was Elise congratulated by a divine entity for the miracle of her immaculate conception.

“Huh?” Elise stared up at Lucy. *What the hell? (What the hell?)*

“ ... ”

Alan drew close to Elise. He actually looked way worse for wear than the

princesses; wounds covered his upper body and his adamantite shovel looked several millions of years older—basically a rock. The aftershock of a miracle, no doubt. Said miner looked down upon Elise and laid it all out frankly. “...Sorry. I misfired.”

“YOU WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!” The small piece of Catria’s mind that had managed to return exploded. Being such a small piece, her mind soon collapsed again. All she could do was laugh. “What are you going to do about this?! Seriously! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

“I have to do something,” Alan agreed, “but for now...I need rest... Catria, Lithisia, I leave the rest to...”

And just as he was about to finish his sentence, Alan collapsed in place between Elise (a virgin, if pregnant) and Lithisia (still just a virgin).

Next to him, the seven orbs fell from the shovel and turned to ash, signaling that their job was done. Immaculate conception via Wave Motion Shovel Blast. In order to forge this miracle, the orbs had used the last of their power.

Illuminated by the sun’s light, the ash of Rostir was carried into the distance by a gust of wind.

“Shovel!” Lithisia gently caressed Alan. “Sir Miner, aaaah... I’m so sorry...!”

A misfire. He’d misfired. All because of Lithisia. All because she had wished for more time. Sir Miner had done nothing wrong. He had missed because her conviction faltered, ultimately leading to Elise’s virgin pregnancy. The princess continued to apologize as the tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Wait, pregnant? This has gotta be some kind of j-joke.” Elise stared at her round stomach and once again whispered to herself. She hadn’t yet collected herself.

“It’s no joke. If anything, it’s legendary,” Catria snorted.

Indeed. What had transpired on this day was undoubtedly legendary. The strongest man in the world had fallen in love with the maddest woman in the world, and due to incredible powers, induced an immaculate conception that was subsequently announced by the angels themselves. Except the pregnant girl in question was a fake.

What a fascinating new legend. And Catria had been present for it all.

Crack.

Something snapped. It was the sound of Catria's entire self snapping in half. She suddenly started digging at the ground.

"Um, Catria?"

"Oh, Lucy. Hey. I was just thinking of taking a brief eternal rest."

"There's nothing brief about eternity!"

"If I have to watch the world devolve any further into a shovel, I'm going to end up becoming one myself."

Catria chuckled. It was all over. Shovel Hell was gone, but Rostir was now the Holy Land of Shovelir, and it even had a brand-new legend thanks to the Wave Motion Shovel Blast. The world no longer had any common sense for regular human Catria to protect.

"Y-you can't! Without you, who will save the world?!" Lucy pleaded.

"Please, let me rest... The world is over... I just want to die as a human."

"No, no, no! And plus, you've basically already given up on being a human anyway!"

"Excuse me?!"

"Hey, you guys!" Elise shouted. "C-could someone please explain to me what's going on?!"

"You're asking for the impossible," said Catria.

Nobody present could give Elise what she wanted. If anyone could, they'd be a shovel.

But Catria's knightly obligations compelled her to give in and give it a shot anyway. "First, let me cut to the chase. You're pregnant. You can thank that Wave Motion Shovel Blast."

Talk about starting with the impossible.

"Excuse me?"

“Alan meant to do it to Lithisia, but he missed.”

“What? Huh? What sort of lazy joke is that? This must be some kind of bad dream.”

If only it were a dream. Sadly, it was reality.

Sweat beaded Elise’s forehead. “N-no, seriously. Stop joking around. I mean, I’ve finally attained the power of a god...”

“You mean the power of shovel. Could you please just understand that one simple fact?”

“But! If this isn’t a miracle caused by a god, then we’re on the path to destruction!”

Catria attempted to clear up this misconception, but before she could, Lucy and Elise both stiffened in terror.

“?!”

An overwhelmingly powerful presence descended, one defined by unimaginable heat and pressure.

“What is this?!” Goosebumps covered Catria from head to toe. Whatever approached surpassed the power of Alan’s immaculate conception beam. Driven entirely by instinct, Catria looked up at the sky, though she immediately doubted her own eyes. “The sky...the sun?!”

The giant sun loomed directly overhead, but there was no sky to speak of. To put it more accurately, the entire sky was blocked out by an enormous flock of what looked like birds from afar—70 percent birds, 30 percent sky. But they weren’t birds; birds didn’t possess shining holy auras.

As Lucy trembled, she whispered quietly, desperately. “Ah... Ah... Lord El...”

“El?” Catria followed Lucy’s line of sight, back to what she thought was the sun. She soon realized the error in her judgment. Though still miles away, its form seemed to directly pierce her consciousness.

A perfect, golden-haired girl. Her eyes were closed, making it difficult to assess her expression. In human years, she appeared to be around sixteen. But it was obvious that she was no human. Her face, ears, chest, wings—her entire

existence shone. Her golden locks extended all the way down to her feet, giving off golden light almost like a solar flare.

“That’s...a god?”

There was but a single imperfection in her image. Her shining white robe had been torn, nearly revealing a bit of her chest. In fact, the manner in which it was torn reminded one of the fake Lithisia that Alan had impregnated.

How had that come to pass? The moment she had the thought, Catria began to sweat profusely. *Don’t tell me...*

Sun God El’s voice boomed through the air. “Mortals, you have committed grave sins.”

The air itself shook.

“First, in all of your impertinence, you dared turn my world into Hell.”

The voice in itself proved Catria’s theory correct. The god’s clothes had been torn by Alan’s Wave Motion Shovel Blast, which had scraped the very sun.

“Second, you dared impale my sun with something so filthy. Third, you have made light of the most holy way a life can be brought into this world. Fourth, you have violently damaged the great Sun God El’s favorite outfit. For these grave four sins, I shall pass judgment upon you in the name of the Sun God El.” Finally, her expression changed. The perfect god puffed out her cheeks like a child. “I’ll never, ever, ever, ever forgive you!”

As she yelled, the army of angels descended from the sky with screeching violence.

“Ha ha...” Catria laughed. She took up her sword. They were in terrible danger. Alan’s Wave Motion Shovel Blast had only been strong enough to damage the Sun God’s clothes, and said deity now intended to crush them.

But Catria laughed nonetheless. After all, she yet again had proof that she wasn’t crazy. Even the gods hated to see what had come of this world.

“See?! You did this, Alan!”

He had performed such a bizarre shoveling that he had infuriated the powers that be.

“That is indeed...a god.”

Next to Catria, Elise was on her hands and knees, staring up at the sky. A real god was going to wreak divine retribution upon them. Why? Elise already knew the answer to that question, though she didn't want to.

Alan and Lithisia were not gods; they were nothing. Catria had been right.

“It...can't...”

Elise had been unable to accept her shoveled fate.

“It can't be...”

And now she would die at the hands of the furious heavens.

“It...can't...be...”

Tears welled in her eyes.

Why? This can't be happening to me. This wasn't supposed to happen! I should be a God-class entity who exceeds the might of even the Demogorgon. A being nobody can scorn. The ultimate existence.

But the reality was that Elise was naught but a frail creature to be insulted and destroyed.

“I... No... I... This can't happen... NOOOO!!!” The tears flowed freely from her eyes.

Swoosh!

Lithisia stood between Elise and the angels. With her red shovel, she deflected an angel's sword slashes while clad only in her underwear.

“Huh...?”

“Elise, step back,” said the princess, almost entirely in the buff. She held her red shovel tightly with an expression that seemed ready to take on the world.

Elise blinked wildly. The appearance of the princess shocked her to the core.

“I'll protect you,” Lithisia declared with a smile more confident than that of divinity itself.

Elise sat bewildered for several seconds before finally collecting herself.
“There’s no way! You can’t do that! That’s the army of God! They’re not like you guys. They’re the real deal!”

“That means nothing, shovel.”

“Nothing, shovel?!”

Lithisia smiled once more. Her smile was laced with a dash of loneliness, yet joy still peeked through. It might have been due to a misfire, but Sir Miner’s successor still existed.

My request led him to use all his power to make a miracle. In that case, there’s only one thing for me to do.

Lithisia remembered the words he had once spoken to her.

“My shovel can pierce everything that ever has been or will be.”

Faced with the heavenly host staring her down, Lithisia couldn’t stop shaking. Yet she did her best to use the inhuman levels of willpower she had developed on her journey to keep her fear in check.

I made Sir Miner do something absurd. That’s why I need to take responsibility for my actions. I have to do this.

“Even if I face a dragon...” Lithisia declared as she pointed her shovel at the Sun God. “Even if I face a god, shovel!”

This would, in the future, become the preface to the Founding Constitution of The Holy Shovel Empire.

To be continued...

(What the hell am I going to do with this? ~Author)

Short Story:

A Shovel Report on Princess Lithisia

“THERE WE GO. My report’s finally done. What a long, grueling journey this has been...”

Ninja Orc, a spy serving Zeleburg’s army, was extremely tired. A talented interloper, he had been charged with monitoring Lithisia at all times, all so that, should his master so order it, he could at any time or place kidnap the princess.

This was the most difficult mission of his entire career.

He reviewed his report, still struggling to confirm its shocking details.

The princess’s quarters were located on the top floor of the World Tree Castle, and she was early to rise.

“Mmm, good morning, shovel!”

Lithisia stretched out on the bed, still in her nightgown. Every morning she awoke at the same time thanks to her internal clock. 5:31 A.M., every single morning. Apparently, she did this because 5=S, 3=E, and 1=L. Hence, “SHOVEL.” Yeah.

“Time for my morning Shovelthenics, shovel!”

And so the princess took up a series of Wave Motion Shovel Blast poses. She undid the safety, lined up her shot, and even made the sound of the attack with her mouth, repeating this process a total of three times.

In the Holy Shovel Empire, Lithisia planned to make it a requirement for all members of the military and all students undergoing mandatory Shovel Education to do Shovelthenics in the morning. The princess needed to set an example.

“Whew! I worked up a sweat! I should get changed before breakfast.”

And so Lithisia Shovel Sashayed over to the dining hall, making sure to stop by

the Shovel Changing Room (a dressing room with all kinds of clothes that had Shovel Designs on them), and slipping into her princess dress. Normally she would have had several attendants to help her put this on, but Princess Lithisia instead had the help of multiple Shovel Women.

As for what “Shovel Women” referred to...well, they were the princess herself. To put it simply, she divided herself.

“Shovel, shovel, shovel!”

After gripping her shovel and repeating those words thrice, mini-Lithisias about fifteen inches tall a pop appeared before her. Indeed, this princess divided herself on a daily basis. It was more than safe to say she that was no longer a member of the human race.

“Breakfast time, shovel!”

Walnut bread and honey soup, plus a bowl of cornflakes. The elf girl Fio usually prepared breakfast for Lithisia, and the princess ate it using her shpoon (shovel-shaped spoon) or barehanded. She once tried to eat the walnut bread with her shpoon, but it turned out to be a touch too difficult.

“I am to be a Shovel Princess, and therefore of course my bare hands are shovels as well, shovel!”

“What are you saying, Your Highness?”

That was how she pushed her way into being able to eat with her hands.

However, since forks were still off-limits, meat dishes were a struggle.

“By the way, where is Sir Miner?”

The princess cast her gaze around the breakfast table. “Sir Miner” referred to Alan, one of the princess’s followers. Princess Lithisia longed for him. Though actually, it was more like worship. Idolization? Shoveling?

“Wait, what’s up with this entry?”

Ninja Orc did not recall ever writing these words. He remembered writing about worship and idolization, but not shoveling.

“Did one of my people rewrite this?”

Despite the faint chill creeping down his back, Ninja Orc continued to reread his report.

Lithisia then washed off the sweat she had worked up during her morning Shovelthenics in the bath. Crazily enough, this princess even brought a shovel into the bath with her. Rustless metal, apparently. She used it like a body scrub, washing every part of her body. This was prep for her morning shovel training.

“T-today might be the real deal, shovel...”

Lithisia used the shovel to scrub every inch of her body. Shoof, shoof, shoof. No matter how one thought about it, this couldn’t be good for her skin, yet for some reason her complexion shone even more brightly. Her eyes took the shape of shovels and her eyelids even began to flutter as she drooled.

In other words, she was getting extremely, uh, *into* this shovel (a completely merciless opinion).

“Ah... Sir Miner... Shovel, shovel... Love... Shovel...”

The princess pressed her shovel to her chest and began to rub said shovel up against her great mountains.

Shoof, shoof, shoof.

“Ah, this is too much! Ah, nobody but Sir Miner is allowed to watch me shovel, ah! Ah! I shouldn’t be doing this, but, ah! Did you write this all down, shovel?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Before Ninja Orc realized what was happening, Lithisia stood in front of him. In the dark room, her shovel-shaped pupils shone brightly. She smiled, but it was a terrible and terrifying smile.

“Hee hee. As long as you didn’t write down that bit, I was willing to

overshovelook all of this, shovel.”

“B-but, h-how are you here, Princess Lithisia?!” Ninja Orc was a first-class spy, and yet he hadn’t sensed her presence until the moment she chose to show herself.

“The ‘shovels’ in your report. That’s all there is to it.”

“What does that even mean?!”

Lithisia smiled. “Whenever you read the word ‘shovel’...” She pointed her shovel at the report. “I, as the Shovel Princess, am present there as well, shovel.”

Several seconds passed before Ninja Orc understood.

This princess, she’s...she’s...! She was a “shovel” the likes of which someone such as him should never have come in contact with.

“Goodbye, shovel!”

That’s where Ninja Orc’s existence ended. The next time he woke, he would be Shovel Ninja.

“Hee hee... Ah, right. There’s one other person who read the shovel report.” Lithisia smiled and turned.

As for where she was looking, I suppose that goes without saying. She turned to *you*.

Then, she spoke. “Everyone, thank you so much for reading *The Invincible Shovel!* I hope you stick with us, shovel!”

I know the heroine’s a little out there, but thanks for reading, shovel.

~The author, who has completely lost control of his own tale

Afterword

HHEY ALL. It's me, Yasohachi Tsuchise.

Volume 4, right? Four whole volumes! Talk about a historical undertaking, amirite? By the way, this is completely unrelated, but I'm basically the magistrate who handles anything and everything. Sorry, I know this has nothing to do with anything. Please forgive me. I have a full five pages to fill here, largely because I miscalculated how long this volume would be. If I don't shift jobs over to being a magistrate, how am I supposed to fill up an additional five pages?

I am the magistrate who can handle anything! As such, five pages is nothing to me!

That's more than enough self-brainwashing for now.

Anyhow, I'm going to use this vast space to write about something I haven't written about in any of the afterwords yet. That said, if I suddenly write about the matcha latte I got from the drink bar at Jonathan's and how tasty it was (it was sweet and green), I doubt the readers would be very happy (I've already spent nearly three lines on this), so instead I'm going to write about something related to shovels. But now that I think about it, there's nothing on this planet unrelated to shovels, so I guess that means I can write about whatever I want. Man, being omnipotent rules. All hail the shovel!

Ahem. So, about them shovels.

Back in Volume 1, I wrote about the reasons why I went with a shovel fantasy. If I remember correctly, part of it was because of a famous idol character who would often dig holes for herself, and how I felt that was extremely fantasy-like. As part of my current brainwashing technique, I just had some shochu to strengthen the effect, so my memory is a bit fuzzy. You'll have to forgive me.

The little idol that digs holes only to bury herself in them is both extremely cute and extremely fantas[tic/]y.

That was reason numero uno.

But actually, things get real after that.

Reason number two: I wanted a fantasy where shovels are the most useful weapon when it comes to trench warfare.

Needless to say, as this is common sense, it is widely believed that during the first and second World Wars, the shovel was the most useful weapon in trench-based close-range combat. Legendary, even. Now, let's put aside whether that's true or not and embrace the fact that it sure seems like an attractive bit of fantasy, no?

Nearly two hundred million people participated in both wars. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that almost all of those soldiers held fantasies of shovels within their hearts. In other words, you're looking at the fantasy power of over two hundred million people. If I remember correctly, Japan's population is something like one hundred million, three hundred thousand people, give or take. So we're talking about a fantasy power almost one and a half times greater. Isn't that nuts? Is this even correct? I'm kind of worried now, but whatever, it's all true (self-brainwashing).

On top of that, Japan is the source of what we call Asian fantasy, which means that this shovel fantasy power (remember: one and a half times greater than Japan's) is also one and a half times greater than the fantasy power of the ninja, the icon of oriental fantasy.

One and a half times greater than ninja fantasy power. This is undoubtedly amazing.

The shovel has quantitatively been proven to be fantasy.

Well then, now that I'm almost done with my shochu, on to the next reason.

Reason number three: The shovel is an extremely important tool when it comes to clearing dungeons.

I believe I wrote about this in Volume 3 during the Dark Nation arc. Yeah, that sounds about right. I'll have my editor confirm this for me later. Seriously, I'm really sorry (random apology ahoy!). Anyway, dungeons have been an important function of fantasy since the beginning of time. Considering how that one series about picking up people in dungeons has grabbed the hearts of so many, I think it's safe to say that to many, dungeons = fantasy now.

Anyway, when it comes to clearing dungeons, being able to control the terrain is extremely important.

For example, let's talk about one of the grandfathers of fantasy game genres, the roguelike—specifically, games like *NetHack*, *Angband*, and the *Wanderer* series. Being able to dig into the ground and control the environment to create an advantage for yourself is a key technique across all three games.

Because the shovel is what makes this possible, it's extremely important. And because dungeons = fantasy, shovels are therefore a requirement in fantasy stories. And since the shovel is a requirement, one could argue that fantasy and shovels are actually one and the same.

Whoa, hold up, me. Is this really okay? Aren't you kind of brute-forcing this a little?

Sorry, now I'm kinda worried about my whole thesis.

It's easy to be misunderstood when writing a novel like this, but I often worry about my own point of view. For example, I spent three years worrying about whether zaru soba was cute or not. I'm the type of person who has to keep thinking things over, then at the end of that long process, I have to come up with a bunch of reasons as to why I shouldn't be concerned.

That's the kind of "worry" I'm talking about right now, so I'm gonna get on to reason number four.

Reason number four: Shovels fire Wave Motion Shovel Blasts.

Shovels fire Wave Motion Shovel Blasts, even outside of this series. As proof

of this, there were powers akin to Wave Motion Shovel Blasts in a game I played just before writing this novel. The Wave Motion Shovel Blast-esque power in said game pierced walls and enemies alike, dealing 500 points of base damage. It was the strongest attack in the game and had a decomposition attribute.

The important bit here is the decomposition stuff. In terms of that attribute, both shovels and the Wave Motion Shovel Blast are one and the same.

The shovel is a tool designed to allow you to take apart the ground. A Wave Motion [Shovel] Blast is a beam designed to take apart space itself. This means they have a high level of compatibility with one another. If I remember correctly, back in Volume 1, I wrote about how I came up with the Wave Motion [Shovel] Blast because of one of the cheer songs at summer high school baseball tournament. Although, even before that, I knew that beams could be fired from shovels, so it wasn't much of a stretch to start writing about them.

So: Wave Motion Shovel Blasts are the most extreme fantasy of all, which makes a shovel that can fire a Wave Motion Shovel Blast fantasy as well.

Under that logic, I believe that shovels are fantasy.

And just like that, five pages, POOF! Gone. Shovels are awesome.

Last but not least, some words of gratitude.

To my editor. All I can do is keep apologizing. The fact that you're reviewing even this afterword is something I'm so grateful for. Hagure Yuuki-sensei, despite how crazy things were this time out, thank you so much for the incredibly adorable Lthisia illustrations you drew for me. To Fukuhara-sensei, in charge of the manga adaptation, thank you so much for the Alice juices. They're the best. I'm hoping for mountain bandit boss juices too. Wait, what am I saying?

And last but not least, to the readers. Thank you for everything. If you laughed even once while reading this, I'm eternally grateful. I plan on writing stories like this going forward. Apparently, I'll be writing Volume 5, so, uh, I'm hoping for

your support going forward.

And that's all from yours truly, Yasohachi Tsuchise! Catch you later, shovel (farewell)!



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